Nilkanth Varni

An Epic Pilgrimage of a Child-Yogi

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(Continued back flap)

Title cover:
Nilkanth Varni at Mansarovar

NILKANTH VARNI

An Epic Pilgrimage of a Child-Yogi

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Inspirer: HDH Pramukh Swami Maharaj

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Preface

As a child, he was called Ghanshyam. As a teenager, he was known as Nilkanth Varni. And, when he launched his mission to establish Ekantik Dharma (dharma, *gnan, vairagya* and bhakti) in Gujarat, he was popularly hailed as Bhagwan Swaminarayan.

During his childhood years in Chhapaiya and Ayodhya, Ghanshyam revealed his divinity to his parents, friends and many others.

As Nilkanth Varni, he renounced home and undertook a pilgrimage throughout India for seven years, travelling 12,000 km barefoot from Ayodhya in the north to Kanyakumari in the south, and then up northwards towards Gujarat. His spiritual adventures reflect an amazing story of determination, fearlessness, austerity, service and compassion. The fundamental purpose of Nilkanth Varni's travel was to redeem people and to revive the sanctity of our holy pilgrim places.

As Bhagwan Swaminarayan, he ushered in a moral and spiritual renaissance in Gujarat and resuscitated the pristine bhakti tradition.

Nilkanth Varni, is a translation of its original version in Gujarati, *Bhagwan Swaminarayan* by Shri H.T. Dave.

We thank the translators, Shri Varanasi Rama Murthy and Sadhu Vivekjivandas, for their effort and devotion. We sincerely appreciate Sadhu Amrutvijaydas, Sadhu Jnanpurushdas, Sadhu Shrijiswarupdas and others who have helped in reviewing and making this publication possible.

- Swaminarayan Aksharpith

Introduction

This is a true story of an 11-year-old boy called Nilkanth Varni, who undertook an epic pilgrimage of India. The pilgrimage lasted 7 years, one month and 11 days, covering 12,000 km by foot. His purpose was to guide, encourage and help people realise the path of righteousness. By the time Nilkanth concluded his pilgrimage he was a youth of 18.

He began his journey with meagre possessions – the most precious object he carried with him was a Shaligram, a hand-rest, a deerskin, a *kamandal* and a piece of cloth to filter water. He was wearing a *kanthi* around his neck and was carrying a *mala* in his right hand. He also possessed a mini-book, which he had prepared himself, containing the essence of the shastras. Nilkanth walked barefoot wearing only a loin-cloth even in the bone-chilling snows of the Himalayas! He descended into deep valleys and ascended peaks that jutted out of unmarked territory. He plunged into roaring torrents unmindful of the horrified protests of onlookers. Fearlessness was a hallmark of this spiritual adventurer. He carried no map or chart.

His spiritual travels took him from Kailas-Mansarovar in the Himalayas to Rameshwar in the south, and Dwarika and Somnath in the west to Kamakshi Mandir and Gangasagar in the east. At the time of Nilkanth's spiritual travels Sanatan Dharma was facing assaults from many imposters who posed as spiritual leaders. He was dissatisfied with the ignorance and malpractices of some priests who he came across his journey. Nilkanth encountered these practitioners of black magic at several places. At Kamakshi in Assam, Pibek evoked all his tantric powers to destroy Nilkanth; but he failed and was transformed. At Jagannath Puri the chief of the fake sadhus very nearly killed him. Nilkanth's intention was to make people lead virtuous and purposeful lives according to

the tenets of dharma, by freeing them from the clutches of these charlatans.

But what were the resources the young Brahmachari had at his command? His chief asset was his pure, supreme divinity that reflected his resplendent personality and serene face to the wide range of people he met during his pilgrimage.

Maharaja Ranjit Sinh, the doughty Sikh ruler who carved a niche for himself in the annals of Punjab, was impressed with Nilkanth and took his refuge on meeting him at Badrinath and Haridwar. The king and queen of Butolnagar in Nepal offered their daughters and their kingdom. The mahant of Shripur proposed that he become the head of the mandir and manage its hefty annual income. He was greatly impressed by Nilkanth's feat when he tamed a ferocious lion. The young Brahmachari declined all these offers with a smile. His mission was not to rule kingdoms, ashrams or be honoured with fame and riches.

He disapproved of dissolute ways even when he saw them in high places. Once he ticked off a Vaishnav Acharya at Ramanuj's birthplace. The acharya felt annoyed that one so young as Nilkanth should preach to a distinguished sadhu like himself to observe *brahmacharya*. He spoke angrily to Nilkanth and had him ejected from the ashram. Nilkanth left, politely saying that such ill behaviour did not suit an ascetic.

Wherever he travelled Nilkanth asked five questions regarding the nature of *jiva, ishwar, maya,* Brahma and Parabrahma. He did not get satisfactory replies to these questions till he reached Ramanand Swami's ashram at Loj in Saurashtra (Gujarat).

With Ramanand Swami away on tour in the Kutch region Muktanand Swami satisfactorily answered his questions. Nilkanth Varni was pleased and decided to stay there.

In the ashram, Varni disliked the free mixing of the genders and arranged separate discourses for men and women. Once, he saw a window in the wall through

which fire embers were received by a sadhu from the next door neighbour's wife. Nilkanth saw this as a breach of dharma. He had the opening closed.

Ramanand Swami gave *diksha* to Nilkanth and named him as Sahajanand Swami and Narayan Muni. He often used to say that he was merely a drum-beater and that Varni was the chief player. A year later he handed over the reins of the fellowship to Sahajanand Swami, who was only 21 years old. After Ramanand Swami passed away Sahajanand Swami gave the Swaminarayan *mahamantra* to the congregation. Thereafter he became popularly known as Bhagwan Swaminarayan.

From the age of 21 to 49, when he passed away, he introduced a moral, and spiritual renaissance with the help of 3,000 *paramhansas* and sadhus, who themselves observed a strict moral code of conduct, namely, *nishkam* (celibacy), *nirlobh* (non-greed), *nisswad* (non-taste), *nissneh* (detachment) and *nirman* (humility). Bhagwan Swaminarayan and his *paramhansas* inspired people to lead a life of character and faith in God. He asked them not to kill animals even for sacrifice and to abstain from stealing, adultery, taking meat, drinking alcohol, etc.

He worked to lift the prevailing rigidity in the caste system and opposed untouchability. He championed the welfare of women and abolished evil practices like sati and female infanticide. He succeeded in transforming lawless men like Joban Pagi, Sagram Vaghri and others into great devotees. He had a following of two million devotees, and was hailed as a torch-bearer of Indian culture.

Bhagwan Swaminarayan wrote the Shikshapatri in Sanskrit, which is a code of conduct for all his devotees – renunciants as well as for householders. The Vachanamrut is a compilation of his spiritual discourses accomplished by four scholarly *paramhansas*.

The worship of Bhagwan Swaminarayan and Aksharbrahma Gunatitanand Swami,

his choicest disciple and first successor, is the lynchpin of the Swaminarayan philosophy.

Subsequently, the gurus that have followed in the Swaminarayan Sampraday have continued the work of Bhagwan Swaminarayan. The first guru was Aksharbrahma Gunatitanand Swami. He was succeeded by Bhagatji Maharaj, Shastriji Maharaj, Yogiji Maharaj and the present guru is Pramukh Swami Maharaj.

In 1907, Shastriji Maharaj established the Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS) to promote the principles of Sanatan Dharma preached by Bhagwan Swaminarayan.

As the Sampraday believes in Ekantik Bhakti and that God has a form, mandirs have been built to spread bhakti and *upasana.* Bhagwan Swaminarayan had himself built six mandirs. Shastriji Maharaj built five mandirs and consecrated the *murtis* of Bhagwan Swaminarayan and Aksharbrahma Gunatitanand Swami. He was succeeded by Yogiji Maharaj who spread the Satsang to East Africa and England. Pramukh Swami Maharaj has made the BAPS into a worldwide socio-spiritual organisation, personally inspiring and consecrating over 650 mandirs. The Akshardham monuments at New Delhi and in Gandhinagar, Gujarat, epitomise the glory of Indian culture, values and principles for the uplift of mankind. The traditional *shikharbaddh* mandirs in London, Nairobi, Houston and Chicago provide inspiration to countless people worldwide.

To pay tribute to Nilkanth's epic travels, Pramukh Swami Maharaj has inspired a wonderful Imax film on Nilkanth Varni's pilgrimage at the Swaminarayan Akshardham in New Delhi. The entire complex pays obeisance to over 10,000 years of India's glorious culture, art, architecture and wisdom.

1. Historic Departure

1791-92

Thursday, 18 July 1793 (A.S. 1849, Ashadh *sud* 10). The day of his historic departure from home was like any other day. Ghanshyam got up at about 4 am, a couple of hours before sunrise, picked up his meagre belongings – a Shaligram, a piece of cloth to filter water, and a staff, and set out towards the river Saryu. Ghanshyam was leaving home. His steady and firm step showed his inner determination to re-establish the pure Bhagvat Dharma. The members of the household were in deep slumber as he had willed.

The atmosphere was gloomy with a steady downpour interspersed by claps of thunder and flashes of lightning. The *urdhvapundra tilak* on his forehead, his flowing locks tied up in a bun, the Vaishnav *kanthi* around his neck, the *kamandal* in one hand and a rudraksh*mala* in the other, the arm rest, the loin cloth and deer skin lent an aura of holiness to his personality. He carried around his neck a small book which contained the essence of all the scriptures he had read and edited after meticulous research. Though young in years, he had already acquired the reputation of a formidable scholar by defeating the pundits of Kashi in a philosophical discussion. He walked steadily on, dispelling the surrounding gloom.

There was swiftness in his steps and joy on his face as he embarked upon his mission to uplift mankind. He had no regrets in renouncing his brothers, relatives and friends. Nilkanth cast a last look at the house which had provided the setting for his earthly sojourn all these years and offered a parting bow. He never looked back thereafter. He took a renewed vow to redeem those who were thirsting for salvation.

City of Ayodhya

The mandirs of Ayodhya – Kanakbhuvan, Swargadwar, Ram Janmasthan, Sugrivtila, Hanumangadhi – have come to acquire greater veneration as they had been sanctified by Nilkanth Varni during his infancy and boyhood. The streets of Ayodhya, the wrestlers' ground, the sacred banks of Saryu-Ganga where Nilkanth had played and worshipped have become popular centres of pilgrimage. The young celibate left his home for uplifting innumerable souls. Ghanshyam (Nilkanth's childhood name) faded out of existence and in his place 'Nilkanth Varni', the embodiment of renunciation, was born on that day. It was going to be a long journey.

The setting moon was casting a dim light as Nilkanth crossed over from one street to another in the venerable, ancient city of Ayodhya. Ayodhya which represents Vishnu's forehead was going to become desolate once again. It had a similar traumatic experience when Bhagwan Ram went into 14 years exile with Sita and Lakshman to fulfil his father's promise. Now Nilkanth was quitting home forever. Ayodhya resembled a mourning widow in the prevailing darkness. There was darkness all around. Even the flicker of a tiny lamp in the odd house cast a dark shadow, making the scene look more bizarre. The desolation was complete. An eerie silence

haunted the city. It was occasionally broken by a scream from someone having a nightmare. But these things did not affect Nilkanth who was immersed in his divine form and mission. He was travelling from one street to another. He was sure of his goal – to make people fit to reach Akshardham. With firm determination he strode confidently through the city undeterred by the surrounding scene. He heard the sonorous strains of the Gita emanating from a house. He stood for a while and listened to the verse, "I am seated in everyone's heart and from me comes remembrance, knowledge and forgetfulness. By all the Vedas am I to be known; indeed I am the compiler of Vedant and I am the knower of the Vedas." (Bhagvad Gita, 15-15.)

Encounter with a Demon

Nilkanth came to the bank of the river Saryu which was in spate. As it was quite early there was no one around except a giant evil man following him. Nothing could be hidden from Nilkanth. He could penetrate the innermost thought of anyone and gauge any action, however secretive it might be.

Nilkanth stopped and looked at the giant. The evil giant who was following asked Varni, "You want to cross the Saryu?" Nilkanth merely nodded.

The giant demon said in a hoarse voice, "Then come with me. I shall help you cross the Saryu." Nilkanth replied, "You go ahead I do not need your help." The giant was annoyed by the reply. He turned and lifted Nilkanth with his enormous hands. So, Nilkanth remained unperturbed. But the reason he made the evil man act thus was to give him the fruits of his karma. He ran guffawing. Even the bravest of hearts would stop on seeing the mammoth frightening creature. The evil giant was delighted on seeing the havoc the Saryu was causing. He thought that once he

threw Nilkanth he would be drowned in the rampaging river. The horrible creature guffawed at the thought. "A tiny fellow dare mock me. I shall make him pay for it," thought the creature. He ran up to Ramghat clutching Varni in his hands. After reaching the Ghat he hurled Nilkanth into the turbulent river. Ayodhya heard the echo of the loud laughter of the evil giant. It sounded as if there was an earthquake. The town's people woke with a shudder following the echo. At that time there was a wind storm. The giant turned back in wild excitement. He was running helter skelter, besides himself with joy. In that frenzy of excitement he hit a tree which fell with a crashing noise and the giant breathed his last. After that the crashing tree added to the tumult. There was confusion all around. A fierce storm broke out, the bells in the mandir began to sway and started ringing erratically. Dogs and jackals howled. Their hideous cries lent a ghoulish air. The whole of Ayodhya became frantic.

The rampaging Saryu presented a destructive scene. Many of the denizens of the river were being helplessly swept away in its swirling waters. The Saryu became calm after Nilkanth touched the waters. The raging torrent quietened. The river assumed the shyness of a young bride. Varni swam ahead in the broad river. The Saryu considered it a privilege and appeared to come upto the shoulders of Varni because of his yogic powers. Soon after sunrise Nilkanth reached a spot to the north of Ayodhya, about 18 miles away from the town. The Shaligram and the little book which contained the essence of the scriptures that he tied around his neck were the only things left with Nilkanth. The *kamandal*, the deer skin, etc. were swept away by the swirling waters of the river. After reaching the bank, Varni came to a tree and sat under it.

Anguish of Separation

Rampratap (Ghanshyam's elder brother) woke up with a start and sat up in his bed. "What is this noise? Is it an earthquake or a storm? Nilkanth's sister-in-law, Suvasini, too got up. Ichharam (Ghanshyam's younger brother) and Nandram (Rampratapbhai's son) were also frightened. Rampratap instinctively shouted, "Ghanshyam, Ghanshyam." Their first concern was for the safety of Ghanshyam who was sleeping in a different room. "Ghanshyam, Ghanshyam," they called. There was no response. They went into Ghanshyam's room and found it empty. But they found his things in the usual place. Rampratap was groping his way in the semi-darkness and once again shouted for his brother. By now rain was lashing the city. There was more lightning and thunder. The clap of thunder was followed by a downpour.

Suvasini followed Rampratap carrying a lamp. Ghanshyam was not there.

They found out that some of Ghanshyam's articles were missing – his *kamandal*, the book containing his notes of scriptures tied into a bundle and the Shaligram. Everything else was there. Rampratap was puzzled. "Where has Ghanshyam gone?" he cried aloud. The lamp fell from Suvasini's hand. She became unconscious. Ichharam and Nandram began to cry. Rampratap could not stand the sight. He once again shouted "G.. h.. a.. n.. s.. h.. y.. a.. m!!" When their neighbours from Barahattapur heard their screams, they came running. Rampratapbhai too fell down unconscious.

Frantic Search

Everybody started searching for Ghanshyam. His friends also came to the house and joined in the search. Everyone started asking the same questions, "Where has

Ghanshyam gone? When did he go?" But who was to answer the questions? Suvasini and Rampratap were lying on the ground unconscious. Ichharam and Nandram were crying inconsolably. People started searching in the surrounding areas. Meanwhile, Ghanshyam's friend who used to go with him to Saryu for bathing came to call him.

His friends at once launched a search at spots which Ghanshyam used to frequent. The relatives who were sitting near Suvasini and Rampratap were waiting for them to regain consciousness. The near ones would softly call their names. Rampratap was the first to regain consciousness. Slowly he opened his eyes and asked, "Has Ghanshyam returned?" Everyone present assured him that he would come back. Now it was Rampratap's turn to cry.

Meanwhile, Suvasini awoke. She started asking, "O Brother! Ghanshyam, where have you gone? Leaving your brother and me? Where have you gone?" After saying this she started sobbing uncontrollably. Nandram was clinging to her while Ichharam sat by the side of Rampratap crying all the while.

When she saw her husband sitting in front of her, Suvasini asked him amid sobs, "What are you sitting here for? Get up and search for him. How can we live without Ghanshyam?" Rampratap remained seated because he was shocked and heartbroken. He had no strength to stand up. Ichharam came to Suvasini and asked her, "Bhabhi! When will Ghanshyam (Nilkanth) return?" She broke down again and wept profusely. "Son! Brother Ghanshyam has turned out to be very cruel. He has left all of us. Father Dharmadev had once said, 'Take care of Ghanshyam. He is a simple soul, without any attachment. Although he appears like a human being, he is indeed God. Keep him happy. That will benefit you and make you happy.' But the unfortunate woman that I am I had forgotten these words of Father. I could not take proper care

of Ghanshyam." As she uttered these words a continuous stream of tears flowed down her cheeks.

Eager Question

Meanwhile, Ghanshyam's friend who had gone in search of him returned. As soon as she saw him Suvasini asked eagerly, "Did you find Ghanshyam?" "No Sister, my friends and I have searched for him everywhere – at the Saryu Ghat, in the mandirs, at the wrestlers' ring – but we could not find him." On hearing this Suvasini became more grief stricken.

Suvasini was terribly upset. When they saw her pitiable, confused condition, her relatives thought that she had lost her mental balance following the shock. They supported her to the best of their ability. Suddenly she started rushing out of the house shouting, "Ghanshyam... Brother... " She could not say anything further. She fell down. She would say haltingly, "Ghanshyam, have pity on this unfortunate woman and return home. A mere kid like you, how will you live in the forest? Who will feed you? Who will look after you? Tigers, wolves, snakes and lions, will they not torment you?"

Then she laughed like a mad person and said, "But then aren't you God? That is why you have forgotten our love and rejected us." These words reminded the people around of Suvasini's mental condition. The words were coming straight from her inner being. She went on talking in this disconcerted manner. Nobody tried to stop her as they thought if she was allowed to unburden her grief she would have some relief. "My lad, your mother entrusted you to my care. But I could not give you enough love." After saying this she gave the impression of a tired person and heaved a deep sigh. Her tears had dried up. She asked every now and then, "Any news of

Ghanshyam?" But seeing everybody sitting in a forlorn state, she would again take a deep breath. It seemed as if her agony at her separation from Ghanshyam was coming out in the form of sighs.

No Result

Rampratap and some relatives who had gone in search of Nilkanth returned without any success. On seeing the vacant look on their faces Suvasini's grief increased. Ghanshyam's graceful image flashed before her mind's eye. His handsome figure, tender face, the pointed nose with a mole on the left nostril, his broad chest, deep and round navel, tender feet with auspicious marks on the soles; from head to toe the image was fixed in her mind. Her gaze became steady. Soon she went into a trance as she was constantly thinking of him. She fell down. The new development made those around feel that Suvasini had breathed her last. They felt her wrist and found the pulse beating. Soon there was the trace of a smile on her face. She raised her hands, bringing them together in a gesture of respect. Everyone was convinced that she had gone mad. She got up with a smile. Everyone present was surprised at the sudden change.

Millions to be Redeemed

"You are going, Ghanshyam? Go, my son! You are God. You are going far away. You have to redeem millions of souls." Suvasini kept on talking. Her incoherent words and misplaced laughter made everyone feel that she was definitely out of her mind. Then she suddenly turned to Rampratap and said, "Why are you constantly repeating Ghanshyam's name? If you love him run after him. He is God. He will redeem you." Rampratap was taken aback. He told her, "If Ghanshyam is God he

will certainly call me wherever he is and will help me."

Suvasini's calm behaviour made everyone believe that she was all right now. Slowly people began to disperse. When everybody had left Suvasini asked Rampratap, "If Ghanshyam belonged to us solely, he would have stayed at home but he belongs to the entire universe. He once told me, 'Bhabhi, I am going to redeem you if you worship me. I am going out to liberate people. Hanumanji will convey news about me to you.' " Rampratap was listening carefully. Ichharam and Nandram were also listening to the mysterious words even if they did not understand what she was saying.

Suvasini again started her monologue. "We could not retain Ghanshyam. He has left us. This Ayodhya has not loved him. This region has not realised the greatness of his personality. That is why all of us find ourselves in this plight." She started to weep once again. The sun rose as a dim disc on Ayodhya on Thursday, 18 July 1793 (A.S. 1849, Ashadh *sud* 10) to signify Nilkanth's great departure. Suvasini was slightly better. She got up, and calling Ghanshyam's name, attended to the morning chores.

Reasons for Departure

Why did Ghanshyam leave home? The natural answer was to redeem souls as he had manifested on this planet for that purpose. But Rampratapbhai and Suvasini believed otherwise. They thought the death of his two wrestler friends, Dinasinh and Bhuvandin, and the proposal for his marriage led him to renounce home. There is another reason which acted as a stimulus for his departure from home.

His Wrestler Friends

Ghanshyam used to frequent the wrestlers' ground in Ayodhya and became an expert wrestler within four months. He was instructed by two experts – Dinasinh and Bhuvandin. They were his good friends, too. He kept away from others boys of his age who did not come up to his exacting standard of behaviour. The two wrestlers were *brahmacharis* in the strictest sense of the term. They were not only brave but also men of principles. They would keep themselves away from women and would teach a lesson to anyone harassing women on the streets of Ayodhya.

Challenge Accepted

A Brahmin wrestler who had heard of Ghanshyam's proficiency in wrestling wanted to fight with him. Ghanshyam was only a boy of 11 and the challenger was 20 years old. Ghanshyam, Bhuvandin and Dinasinh refused to fight with him. But he was very adamant. At that point Ghanshyam thought it was time for him to teach the wrestler a lesson and he picked up the gauntlet.

In fact the Brahmin wrestler actually wanted to finish off Ghanshyam. The latter told him with a laugh, "You catch my waist with all the strength at your command."

The expert wrestler caught Ghanshyam by the waist. "Now, try to throw me down," Ghanshyam taunted him. The wrestler lifted him and was about to hurl him to the ground when Ghanshyam freed himself from his grasp. Then in a flash Ghanshyam hurled the wrestler to the ground and he began to bleed from the mouth. He also fractured one of his arms.

The spectators hailed Ghanshyam's victory. The father of the wrestler came to the spot and tried to intimidate Ghanshyam. Rampratap also came to the scene. He

came to know of what had transpired and told the father of the wrestler, "Is your son not ashamed of fighting with such a young boy?" People around supported Ghanshyam. The father took his injured son home. Subsequently, the latter nursed a grievance against Bhuvandin and Dinasinh.

Ghanshyam's elder brother, Rampratap, did not like the broil with the Brahmin wrestler. He told Ghanshyam in no uncertain terms that he did not want any more complaints about his behaviour. Ghanshyam retorted, "This is the last time you will get a complaint of this nature."

Rampratap was unaware of the significance of his brother's statement.

Proposal for Marriage

Suvasini thought that the time was right for Ghanshyam to be betrothed for marriage. She took up the matter with Rampratap. Her husband readily agreed with her. So Rampratap dashed off a letter to Nihal Mishra, inviting him and his daughter to his house.

On receiving the letter Nihal Mishra came to Ayodhya with his daughter Chandrakala. Ghanshyam was greatly surprised on seeing the visitors. He at once left the house and did not turn up for lunch.

When Ghanshyam returned home in the evening everybody felt relieved. Suvasini heated the food items and made Ghanshyam sit for the meal. His mind was somewhere else and not in eating. He took a little food and said, "Bhabhi, this is the last meal of yours that I am eating."

Bhabhi said amid laughter, "The marriage is yet to be performed and you have already snapped all ties with your Bhabhi!"

Ghanshyam took pity on her. He thought that souls that are inclined in mun-

dane affairs could not be expected to have transcendental thoughts. "I have manifested to redeem such souls. How can I explain these things to Bhabhi?" Ghanshyam thought. He washed his hands and went to his room. He made up his mind.

Rampratap followed him. "Ghanshyam, Nihal Mishra has come from Khambhariya. Have you met him?"

Ghanshyam replied tersely, "I don't want to meet him. The purpose for which he has come will not materialise." The crisp reply came as a shock to Rampratap. He placed his hand on his shoulder and said, "Oh Ghanshyam, such a noble family is rare to find. You are speaking out of ignorance and you will repent later."

He had no intention of prolonging the conversation. "Brother, I am not saying it out of ignorance or foolishness. I am saying it with full consciousness. This is not my path. My work is to save countless beings by making them leave that path."

But Rampratap persisted in explaining, "Ghanshyam, you are young and innocent. When you feel the impulse of youth you will know, so listen to me."

Ghanshyam said at once. "Brother, give up this talk. This thing will never happen."

Rampratap thought that since Ghanshyam was adamant, there was no use talking to him now. He decided to tackle him the next day. He at once left the room.

Ghanshyam was now alone. He began to think. He felt it was time to embark upon his mission to redeem people from the shackles of *maya* and bless them with the bliss of his eternal abode, Akshardham.

The two incidents, the wrestlers' death and proposal for his marriage, became the defining events of his departure.

Purpose of his Journey

It was a great beginning in the annals of spiritual endeavour when Ghanshyam stepped out of his home in Ayodhya to redeem innumerable souls. Hereafter he came to be known as Nilkanth Varni. He added a new chapter in the history of religion at that auspicious moment of departure. He proved beyond doubt that God incarnates himself on earth in human form and is easily accessible to his devotees. The route to Akshardham which had been blocked and shrouded in abysmal darkness due to man's ignorance was opened on that day, to remain open forever.

The future Bhagwan Swaminarayan was only an 11-year-old boy when he left his home on that auspicious Thursday, 18 July 1793 (A.S. 1849, Ashadh *sud* 10). His mission was to awaken people's spirituality. So he took the first step that saw him out of the house.

2. In The Forest

1792

As a first step towards establishing Ekantik Dharma Nilkanth Varni undertook an enterprising ordeal unheard in the annals of human history. Some of the places were untrodden, except by a few ascetics. The perils of the forest held no terrors to him.

After leaving home Varni felt greatly relieved. He was free as a bird, above the cares and concerns of the mundane world. Barring Shaligram and its container *(batvo)* of wicker work he had shed his other possessions. After a little rest under a tree, he started walking along the bank of the river Saryu. The path was strewn with thorns and pebbles. He kept on walking, keeping step with the thunder and lightning of the monsoon month of July and singing a sweet tune in Malhar *rag*. The peacocks and cuckoos were welcoming the flashes of lightning and claps of thunder with their songs. Nature appeared to have donned a green apparel to welcome him. Nilkanth was absorbed in his own divinity. After walking for nearly five kilometres he found a banyan tree and sat under it in a meditative posture. When Varni opened his eyes after his meditation he found Hanumanji sitting before him. He looked at him and enquired with a smile, "When did you come?"

Hanumanji replied, "Maharaj, it is my daily practice to have your darshan. Following that routine I have been to your house in Ayodhya. When I did not find you there I came to the banks of Saryu. There also I did not see you. While meditating I learnt you were here. So I came here. If you permit me I shall stay with you."

On hearing this, Nilkanth said, "I want to undertake the travellings alone. But when I remember you, you can come. Convey to everyone in Ayodhya that I am safe." After saying this Nilkanth once again engaged himself in meditation. Hanumanji left the place.

First Night

Nilkanth Varni spent his first night of freedom under a banyan tree. The next day, 19 July (Ashadh *sud* 11), he got up, performed his morning ablutions and seated himself under the tree. Then there was a steady stream of people from the village of Amarpur. When they saw him they began to wonder whether Kartikeya Swami or Dhruvji himself had come down to perform austerities. Such was the divine glow radiating from the face of Varni. They ran back and brought to him whatever they could lay their hands on – fruits, sweets and other articles – and offered them to him. Soon there was a mound of fruits, sweets and other eatables near Nilkanth.

Nilkanth consecrated the items by offering them to the Shaligram. Then he ate a little, just enough food to sustain his body, and gave the rest to them as *prasad*. Then several of the village folks asked him, "Brahmachari, why don't you keep something for the evening?" Nilkanth who never believed in hoarding anything looked at them and said with a smile, "If I were to think of food for this evening or tomorrow why would I have left home? A renunciant who has given up worldly

attachments should be prepared to camp out in the open and eat only enough to sustain his body. For, one who has renounced the world should depend on God for sustenance." Thus Nilkanth's sweet voice reflected something beyond worldly desires.

Then he told those who had gathered there, "Now all of you may go. I am not afraid of anything. It is my strength that gives strength to all living beings." The simple village folks could not understand the profundity behind this statement.

In a Hurry

Nilkanth started walking away from there at a brisk pace. It began to rain. It looked as if after listening to the concert of peacocks and cuckoos the rain god seemed anxious to wash Nilkanth's feet as a token of honour. The rivers and the other water courses were full making a symphony of sounds. The greenery enhanced the beauty and coolness of the surroundings. Nilkanth walked briskly, seeming to be in a great hurry. As he proceeded on the difficult jungle paths, the inhabitants of the scattered hamlets, attracted by his magnetic personality, offered him fruits and other eatables. Some offered provisions. Nilkanth offered the food to the Shaligram and took a little, giving the rest back as *prasad*. Whenever people approached him with a view to gaining salvation, he gave them darshan and preached to them. In this manner, Nilkanth reached Lodheshwar village.

The Pandav Mandir

Lodheshwar in Barabanki district in Uttar Pradesh is an ancient village with a Shiv mandir reputedly built by Yudhishthir, the eldest of the Pandav brothers. The mandir was near Lodheshwar lake.

Nilkanth came to the bank of the lake. He found men and women bathing there. He searched for a secluded spot and had his bath. He then came to the edge of the lake and sat there. After completing his puja, he had darshan of Lodheshwar Mahadev. As a result of the bath, some of the water droplets on his locks were shining like pearls. The white *yagnopavit* on his body was flashing like lightning in an overcast sky. After worshipping Shivji, Nilkanth came to the bank of the lake and sat in the grove. The village folks were eager to have the darshan of Varni whose handsome features impressed them. They started to flock around him. Some brought provisions, while some offered fruits and flowers. Nilkanth preached on how to cross the ocean of *maya*. After having his darshan the devout then returned home with a sense of fulfillment.

Nilkanth used to cook food and offer it to the Shaligram. He would then mix it with water and eat. He ate very little food – only enough to sustain his body. He was always immersed in his own self, and preferred seclusion. When he met others it was to put them on the path of moksha. As a rule he never stayed in the same place a second night and was constantly on the move. Those who came in touch with him felt that his discourse was as unique as his appearance.

Overnight Stay

Nilkanth continued his journey. His next stop was Jetpur where he stayed for a while and then came to Pathepur. He camped there overnight. At all the places he visited he would observe the same routine unfailingly. He would accept whatever was offered to him by way of alms. He would cook the provisions and after offering them to God would eat a little himself and distribute the rest as sanctified food. From Pathepur Nilkanth came to Kherilapur.

Here there is an ancient place called Naimisharanya where great sages performed austerities. It has a vast and deep lake, Chakratirth, where the sages performed their ablutions. The serenity of the place made it an ideal spot for meditation. That is why ages ago Brahma had asked the great sages to congregate there to engage in austerities. The sound of Vedic mantras uttered by sages mingled with nature's orchestra. Nilkanth was immensely pleased with the setting which was full of greenery and serenity. The place, once sanctified by Shukdevji, Shaunak and other rishis calmed the senses.

Solemn Welcome

The great sages received Varni with due respect by offering him fruits and flowers. When he entered the place they rushed forward to touch his feet. They were convinced that their austerities had borne fruit with the darshan of Nilkanth. They understood him to be God himself for whom they had been pining all along. He on his part opened their inner eye which enabled them to have a glimpse of Akshardham. They realised that they were face to face with the Supreme God. Varni blessed them and stayed there for four days.

Proceeding further Nilkanth came to Sahejapur. A river was flowing to the north of the town. Varni came to the bank of the river. Because of the extraordinary lustre on his face the villagers came for his darshan.

Warning Ignored

Before taking a bath in the river he placed the Shaligram, the *kamandal* and the deerskin on its bank. As he prepared to jump into the river, the people who were standing on the bank asked Varni not to do so. "The river is on the ram-

page," they warned. Ignoring their warnings he plunged into the river. Everybody thought that the young ascetic would be drowned in the flood. But a miracle occurred as he plunged into the river, the storm suddenly subsided. Nilkanth finished bathing and came out of the river. The bystanders were convinced that by using his divine powers the young Brahmachari had controlled the rampaging river. This enhanced their respect for him. They bowed to him. They realised he was equally capable of controlling people's wayward minds and putting them on the path to God-realisation.

Varni then sat under a mango tree in resplendent splendour. He placed the Shaligram in front of him and started meditating. When he opened his eyes the young Brahmachari found heaps of fruits, flowers, sweets and provisions. Nilkanth offered fruits and sweets to the Shaligram and distributed them as *prasad* to those present. Then he took a small quantity of wheat flour, kneaded it and baked it, squeezed a mango to extract its juice and offered them first to Thakorji. He then mixed the food, added water and ate it. When the people around saw him adding water to such a delicious meal, their respect for his austerity increased.

As it was the auspicious four months *(chaturmas)* everybody requested Varni to stay back. But his objective was different. He said, "I have to have the darshan of Narayan. After his darshan I shall come here. Therefore all of you must happily grant me leave." The villagers were convinced that Nilkanth would certainly return as he said he would. He resumed the journey. After walking for some time, the young Brahmachari came to a river with a bridge across it. He crossed the bridge and entered Barelipur. The northern end of the river was full of trees. He was greatly pleased with the sight. He was always eager to live in jungles, gardens and mountains. There was a beautiful garden with bungalows in it. Nilkanth sought the per-

mission of the gardener and put up in a bungalow.

Verdant Scene

The balconies of the bungalow opened on to the river. He came to one of the balconies and saw the verdant scene. He saw the flooded river from there. The noise of the torrential rains was mingling with the music of the peacocks and cuckoos. The full and overflowing river and the other aspects of the scenario brought great joy to Nilkanth. Nature seemed to be in its element. The youthful Brahmachari started singing a composition of Tulsidas. There was melody in his voice. The roar of the flooded river, the singing of peacocks and the melody of Nilkanth's voice attracted those who had come to see the river in spate. After listening to Nilkanth's melodious voice, they realised that the sweetness of his voice matched his personality. Nilkanth called them with affection and told them to sit near him. He spoke to them of the need to get out of the web woven by *maya*. The listeners were greatly elated as they had not heard such talks, nor experienced such inner light or bliss before. The speech cast a spell on them. They stared at Nilkanth speechlessly. Varni looked at them with a smile playing on his lips. He then accepted their offerings of fruits and sweets and, as usual, took a little and returned the rest as consecrated food.

An Excuse

Nilkanth left the mansion and was accosted by a number of women who had come to fetch water from a well. When they saw the Brahmachari they were curious to know why he had left home at a time of the year when even ascetics stay indoors because of the rains. They barred his way and started bombarding him

with questions. A startled Nilkanth stepped back a few paces. The women started laughing when they saw that he was startled. They said, "Brahmachari! What made you leave home during the rainy season? Were you annoyed with your parents or did you leave home like a coward to escape the taunts of your sister-in-law?"

Varni realised that the women were asking questions out of concern for him. His initial reaction was that of a person who did not expect such questions. He stood like a statue and then thawed a bit.

The questions provided an excuse to the women to detain him and have a fill of the young Brahmachari's beatific image. It made it all the more surprising that such a boy should leave home to face the vagaries of weather. Nilkanth replied in a sweet voice, "Those who do not have a spirit of renunciation or do not have devotion to God are subject to annoyance or behave like cowards and leave home. I have left home to grant salvation to innumerable souls." The women were not happy with the answer. Nilkanth, who had definite ideas on the need to keep aloof from women to set an example, thought things were going too far. When the women came to catch him, Nilkanth ran away from them and became invisible in an instant, like a flash of lightning that disappears in the sky.

* * *

The young ascetic then came near a big city. As a rule he avoided inhabited places. So he skirted the city and entered a dense forest. He was very pleased with the surroundings. The forest had stately trees as if touching the skies. The trees were laden with fruits and flowers. There were flocks of birds that flitted from tree to tree and made the whole place resound with their song. The wild animals

roamed the forest without enmity or hatred. It was into this veritable paradise that Nilkanth stepped in.

The town's ambience is distorted. Man uses it for his selfish ends. Nilkanth saw in this only mindless enjoyment. Whereas in the jungles and mountains the pristine state of nature can be seen. One can have a glimpse of God.

Where Nilkanth stopped was no ordinary forest. As a boy, Narad had performed austerities there. So it was called Naradvan. On seeing Nilkanth several ascetics came to him. This was an added attraction for Varni besides its natural charm. The yogis, who were undertaking austerities there, were greatly pleased to have Nilkanth's darshan. They were overjoyed that their prayers had been answered as a result of Varni's visit. They approached him reverentially with fruits and flowers. They felt that the God within their souls had come out to grace them with his darshan. After the great sages welcomed him with due honour, they resumed their seats. Nilkanth was greatly pleased by their devotion. He stayed in the Naradvan for ten days.

In Bahadurpur

Nilkanth Varni walked on and reached Bahadurpur where he stayed just for a day. The people there were very hospitable and supplied him with food. He blessed them for their welcome and proceeded towards the banks of the Ganga. The sacred river felt twice as sanctified by the touch of Nilkanth's lotus feet. Mother Ganga was beside herself with joy as if she were seeing the original form of Lord Vamanji.

She welcomed Varni by washing his feet with her waves. Varni was greatly pleased by her devotion and granted the river a boon, "I shall always have you near

me and shall always fulfil your desires." He stayed there for a night. Next morning he got into a boat and sailed for Haridwar on Sunday, 29 July 1792 (A.S. 1849, Shravan *sud,* Ekadashi).

In Haridwar

To the north of Haridwar the Ganga flows with great force. There are beautiful ghats here for the convenience of pilgrims. To the north of the ghats there is a pinnacled mandir of Mahadevji facing the east. Varni had his bath there. The place was very crowded with devotees and ascetics and he could not find a secluded spot for meditation. He began moving here and there in search of a suitable spot.

Meanwhile, one Brahmin caught him by his wrist. Varni was surprised. He looked at the Brahmin who said, "Brahmachari, there is a great rush of pilgrims and ascetics here. These ascetics are all armed, and when they start fighting among themselves they throw one another into the river. So, it is very dangerous to stay here. Come with me."

Nilkanth Varni liked secluded spots. So he accompanied the Brahmin. The Brahmin took him northward where a Shiv mandir was situated. On seeing an isolated spot Nilkanth was very happy.

Then the Brahmin asked with folded hands, "Brahmachariji! How shall I address you? You have left home at this young age. What is the reason? Is it because of some sorrow or quarrel, or out of a desire to renounce the world?"

Nilkanth smiled on hearing the question. He said, "I have left home to visit various sacred spots and to have the darshan of Nar and Narayan rishis at Badrikashram. People call me Nilkanth Varni."

On hearing the Brahmachari's words, the Brahmin laughed. He remarked instantly, "Nilkanth is Mahadev's name." Varni replied, "There is communion between me and Mahadev."

On hearing this the Brahmin fell at his feet. Varni passed his hand over his head and blessed him, saying, "Without telling one cannot understand, and without asking one need not tell."

Wife was Surprised

Then the Brahmin began to prepare food for Varni. Meanwhile, the Brahmin's wife came there. She began to wonder, "Only if somebody is greater than him will he serve him. So this Brahmachari must be God."

She came near her husband and said, "O Brahmin! You have been staying here for several eras. Big siddhas have come here. Besides them, countless other sages have come. But I have never seen you serving any of them with such devotion. So tell me, who this Brahmachari is." Her husband replied, "If you sit in meditation you will know who this Brahmachari is. "

The Brahmin's wife sat in meditation. She realised that the Brahmachari was greater than her husband. She at once touched the feet of Varni and revealed, "O Maharaj! I cannot transcend the three *gunas.*"

On hearing this, Nilkanth smiled benignly. He said, "You are spiritually ineligible because you have not served any great soul. This Brahmin takes me to be a great soul and he is serving me."

Then Varni cast a glance at her, made her transcend the three *gunas* and revealed to her his supreme divine form. She became extremely happy with the sublime experience and said, "My husband does not know how to prepare food fit for you to eat.

So, if you order me I shall cook your food."

Varni smiled and said, "I do not wish to get involved in matters that concern husband and wife."

With Shivji

Both the husband and wife prepared a meal of mango juice and chapattis for Varni and called him to take food. Then Varni said, "I do not take alms from unknown people. If you tell me who you are, I shall take food and stay here for the night."

The Brahmin said, "Maharaj! We have not transcended the three *gunas,* but you are beyond them and even then you are asking as if you do not know us."

Varni did not reply. Then the Brahmin's wife said, "O Maharaj! The name of this pilgrim place, Haridwar, is derived from my husband's name 'Har' and I am his wife Parvati. For several eras my husband has been performing austerities here to please you. But today his austerity has been fulfilled and we have had your darshan."

On hearing this, Varni was very happy. He offered the food to the Shaligram and then ate a little, giving the remaining consecrated food to Shiv and Parvati. They called their family and received the blessings of Nilkanth Varni. Shivji worshipped Varni with several items and expressed his devotion. Nilkanth was greatly pleased by his devotion and stayed there for five days.

Visit to Tapovan

Nilkanth's next stop was at Tapovan. Several great sages were performing austerities there to please and win the grace of God. When Varni entered Tapovan the

distinguished sages who were engaged in meditation under the mango tree rushed to him to pay their respects. When they beheld his beatific face and the cool soothing light radiating from it, the rishis were convinced that God himself had come down to earth to redeem them.

They kneeled down at his lotus feet and said, "Oh emperor among celibates! By coming here you have made our lives worthwhile. Your magnetic personality has riveted our attention to you." Varni sat with them. He was pleased by their devotion and said, "Just as you have always been thinking of me, I too have been constantly thinking of you. That is why I have come here to give you darshan. I am pleased with your devotion which you have been performing for ages. To redeem you and to establish Ekantik Dharma I have incarnated on this earth." The great sages were overjoyed by these words. They brought fruits and water for Nilkanth. The young ascetic first offered everything to the Shaligram and then he ate a little himself. The great sages were surprised. They said, "You are God. Then what is the idea in worshipping the Shaligram?" Varni smiled after listening to the question and said, "When God himself incarnates on this earth in a human form it is difficult to realise him. This is due to ignorance. That is why a *murti* of God is consecrated in the mandir so that people can worship him. When God returns to his abode after fulfilling his mission, the devotees then worship the *murti* of God."

Varni was pleased to see their devotion.

The venerable sages brought articles like flowers, garlands, leaves for worship. Varni decorated the Shaligram with flowers and performed puja. After *arti* he got ready to leave. When he told the sages to join him everyone followed him into the forest. When they came to Dhruvji's ashram, he stood on one leg, facing the east, to

perform austerities. He spent ten days in Tapovan. Varni celebrated Janmashtmi there.

Walking along the banks of the river Ganga, Nilkanth came to Lakshman Jhula. Here Lakshman performed austerities for 12 years. At that place there is a beautiful mandir dedicated to Lakshmanji. There is a *murti* of Dhruvji also. Here the Ganga flows with great force and the river is deep.

The road to Kedarnath and Badrinath lies to the east of the bridge. This road has a dense forest. It is believed that in ancient times the great sages performed devotion there. Varni visited Lakshmanji's mandir and stayed for one night. Next morning he crossed the bridge and took the route to Badrinath. A two-day trek brought him to Shripur where Uddhavji had performed austerities. Varni ascended the Chittbhangagiri and Manbhangagiri mountains. He gave darshan to several yogis residing there and fulfilled their wishes. He visited Uddhavji's ashram. Then he returned to Shripur.

Sky for a Canopy

By the time Varni reached Shripur the sun had already set. He had no intention of going to the inhabited part of the town. He saw a mandir and ashram on the outskirts of the town and sat on a platform outside it. On seeing Nilkanth the mahant at once realised that he was no ordinary person. When he saw the effulgent ascetic sitting on the platform he came out to greet and requested him to come in. He said, "Please come inside ashram. There is the threat of wild animals outside. It is dangerous to rest here." Nilkanth was fully aware of the mahant's sentiments and his concern for his safety but did not say anything.

The mahant requested again, "Brahmachari! You must be hungry. Please come

inside to have food and rest." When even after this Varni did not react, the mahant thought that he was observing a vow of silence so he shook him and repeated his concern for his safety, "Maharaj! Please listen to me. If you do not want to come inside the ashram, go to the village. By staying outside you face the danger of death."

Varni said, "Mahantji, I do not stay in populated places and wherever I stay I prefer to stay under the open sky. I am not afraid of death." The mahant was surprised by the reply. He said, "Isn't that the obstinacy of a yogi. When there is no need why are you inviting death by placing yourself in a dangerous situation?" Varni replied at once, "By being afraid of death or by hiding one cannot stop it. I am thankful for your concern but I will sleep here, come what may."

Futile to Argue

The mahant realised that it was no use arguing with the young Brahmachari. He put down the refusal of Varni to come inside the ashram to the obstinacy of a yogi. He took comfort from the fact that he had tried his level best to provide him a safe shelter. "If one is bent on entering death's door how can he be saved?" thinking thus he went inside and closed the door.

Varni projected a picture of undeterred self-confidence. An ordinary person would have been rattled by the account of the dangers of the jungle recounted by the mahant. The young Brahmachari spread out his deer-skin and sat on it for meditation. It was past midnight. The eerie silence was broken by the earth-shattering roar of a lion. The mahant and the residents of the place were woken up by the roar. The head of the ashram started worrying about the safety of Varni. After roaring, the lion opened its jaws, started to lash its tail and assumed a menacing

posture. Its eyes were glowing in the dark. It came and stood before Nilkanth. Some of the birds fell off their perches, landing on low lying branches due to the sudden roar. On hearing the ferocious lion the mahant and his disciples were frightened and their hearts missed a beat. The young ascetic cast a glance at the lion, and a miracle happened. The lion which was preparing to spring at Nilkanth became as meek as a kitten as it experienced samadhi because of Varni's yogic powers. It gathered its forepaws and sat at the Brahmachari's feet. The mahant, who was shaking with fright because of the situation, opened his window. He and his disciples witnessed a strange sight. Nilkanth was caressing the lion and it experienced great happiness while in samadhi. It began to lick Nilkanth's feet as if in gratitude. The mahant and his disciples began to look at each other in surprise at the turn of events. All of them said in unison, "He is an incarnation of God – either Mahadev or Murari." The beast which hunts man and animal alike and whose mere roar makes one's heart pound with fear, was sitting quietly before Varni. The young ascetic had gained complete control over it.

He manages the living and non-living beings like a puppeteer controls a puppet. The string is in his hand. His aim is to redeem anyone who comes in contact with him. By chance the lion came in his path and found peace. Nilkanth passed his hand over the wild beast. It emerged from the samadhi. Soon, it was early morning and time for ablutions. Varni got up and started going towards the river bank. Like a meek cow the lion started following him. There were not many people around. After reaching the bank Varni told the lion, "Now you go your way." At once the lion bowed its head in acquiescence and disappeared into the nearby bushes.

The mahant and his disciples watched all this from a distance. After taking

his bath in the river Varni was absorbed in puja when the mahant and his disciples reached the spot. Even the villagers came for Nilkanth's darshan. After performing circumambulations and prostrating before Thakorji, Nilkanth started praying.

Having witnessed these miracles the mahant could no longer restrain himself. He thought the young ascetic would make an ideal head of his ashram. He said to Varni, "Maharaj you are a great rishi. You are endowed with supernatural powers. If you agree to stay in our ashram we will make you the head. The ashram's annual income is Rs.100,000." The mahant went on talking in this way, but Varni interrupted him with a smile and said, "See Mahantji! If I were interested in your ashram or property why would I have left home? I have decided to visit pilgrim places and redeem souls. I also wish to explain to the world what right conduct is learnt through association with genuine sadhus." Saying this Varni completed his puja. Varni did not take further notice of the mahant. He walked into the bushes on the opposite side as the mahant and his disciples looked on.

Nilkanth made his way through the bushes and proceeded on his journey. He reached Guptakashi. This place contained the linga of Kashi Vishwanath Mahadev. In olden days yogis used to perform austerities here to please Shivji. Nearby, was the city of Shonitpur, the capital of Banasur's (Bali's son) kingdom. There were *murtis* of Ardhanarishwar Shankar riding on Nandi, the bull. At the Kashi Vishwanath mandir there are *murtis* of Parvati and Nandi. Here Ganga and Yamuna flow into a large trough. Pilgrims bathe in the trough and make anonymous donations. Varni had the darshan of Shivji here. He celebrated Jal Jhilani and Vaman Dwadashi at this place. There is a mountain to the north of Guptakashi. He was enthralled by the splendour of the mountain.

Blissful Mood

Nilkanth stayed at Guptakashi for a brief period. He then set out for Guptaprayag. The Ganga flows with a bubbling sound here. He crossed the Ganga by bridge. He was always in a blissful mood. Difficulties on the way would not deter him. Neither torrential rains nor boisterous rivers could block his way. Fierce beasts would become quiet and tame on seeing him and would make way for him. Varni had only one objective, to redeem all – man, beast or bird – who came in contact with him. He wanted to establish a true religion. He had incarnated on this earth to spread true spiritual knowledge. His pilgrimage to these different places was for this purpose. There he gave discourses to those who were eager to attain moksha and also revealed the noble example of sadhus. He was constantly in search of people who believed in acquiring spiritual realisation.

Having walked some distance Varni came across a huge mandir. The mandir housed the *murti* of Triyugi Narayan, together with the *murtis* of Shridevi and Bhudevi. It is believed that the marriage of Shiv and Parvati took place here. Nilkanth did darshan of the *murtis* with deep love. He sanctified the pilgrim places and redeemed the pilgrims. He kept up with his daily routine of not staying at the same place a second night. He could not be detained at any place without reason. This tight schedule was due to the fact that it was his intention to redeem as many people as possible.

Nilkanth's next stop was Gaurikund, also known as Amritkund, where there were hot and cold water springs. This place is believed to be Parvati's birthplace and she often bathed in the Amritkund. There is a Parvati Mandir, and also one dedicated to Radha Krishna, here. Kedarnath is eight miles from here. Varni bathed in the Amritkund and had darshan of the deities in the various mandirs and

then left for Kedarnath.

In Kedarnath

Kedarnath is one of the most important places of pilgrimage in the country and is visited by millions of people every year. Nilkanth's mission was to search for those who wanted to be redeemed and grant them moksha. Thousands of pilgrims in Kedarnath had his darshan. Some people saw the form of Narayan in Varni, while others took him to be a great yogi. When he walked, some bowed to him with respect while others made way for him.

Kedarnath is one of the 12 Jyotirlings. During Sat-yug Upmanyu worshipped Shankar here. Dwapar-yug saw the Pandavs performing austerities here. The Kedarnath mandir has the *murtis* of Usha, Aniruddh, the five Pandavs, Krishna and Shiv-Parvati. Varni passed through the milling crowds of pilgrims and came to the mandir for darshan. As he considered Kedar to be a sacred spot and sought to confer blessings on many people, Varni stayed there for a few days. Then he crossed the glaciers of the Himalayas and reached Badrinath on the ninth day.

In Badrinath

The small, yet pinnacled mandir at Badrinath has the four-armed *murtis* of Shri Nar-Narayan made out of Shaligram stone. The *murtis* are beautiful to look at. They are richly adorned with jewels. As they are sculpted in a meditative posture, their eyes are closed. Their beauty is beyond description and Nilkanth was very happy to have their darshan.

The priest was greatly attracted by the magnetic personality of Varni. He watched the young Brahmachari having darshan without batting an eyelid. The

priest had seen numerous pilgrims, great sages and mahatmas coming to the mandir for darshan but he had never come across such a serene person like Varni. He experienced profound inner peace. He thought that the mandir, whose courtyard was strewn with kumkum, had been sanctified by the touch of Nilkanth's lotus feet. He saw the footprints left by Nilkanth and at once recognised the 16 auspicious signs that proclaim a great soul. The priest felt that Narayan himself had come down to grace him with his darshan after having been satisfied with his devotion.

After regaining his composure the priest approached the young Brahmachari with folded hands and said, "O Brahmachari! Where have you come from? What is your name?" On seeing his friendly feelings Nilkanth smiled and at once recognised the regard the priest had for him. The priest once again started, "You seem to be Narayan himself. From the moment you came I started to experience inner joy. Many people visit the mandir but I have not seen anyone like you." The priest continued with his monologue. Nilkanth merely listened to what he was saying with a smile. The priest started all over again, "I know that great men never talk about themselves. But on meeting you I feel enlightened."

Varni said, "I have come from the east for the darshan of Narayan." The priest at once caught hold of his hands and said, "A great man will never project himself. It is in this that his nobility is revealed. I'll not let you go from here." When Varni saw that the priest was lovingly insistent, he agreed to stay there.

Everyday the priest would affectionately offer Varni the food consecrated by Nar-Narayan. According to his vow Nilkanth would mix water with his food and eat it. One day out of curiosity the priest asked him, "Why do you eat like that?" Then Varni replied with a smile, "Food is taken to sustain the body and not to tick-

le the palate. The taste for a true sadhu should lie in experiencing the bliss of God." When the priest found that Varni ate food only to sustain his body he tried his level best to make him eat more food but he did not succeed. For most of the day Varni would sit before the sanctum sanctorum. Hundreds of pilgrims were attracted to him. The priest served Varni with great devotion and with sentiments of reverence for a few days.

One day the priest asked Nilkanth, "Varniraj, how long has it been since you left home? Where did you have the darshan of the *hindola* festival? Where did you celebrate Devpodhi Ekadashi? Where did you observe Pavitra Ekadashi? Where did you stop for Janmashtmi?" On hearing this barrage of questions Varni was greatly amused. He said, "My intention is not to stay at one place. Normally, I do not spend the second night in the same place. I have stayed here because of your love and devotion." Saying this he saw intense devotion and friendliness on the priest's face. He continued, "We ascetics do not broadcast our actions. By nature we are secretive. But since you have asked I am telling you. I swam the Saryu and came to Amarpur. Then I left that place on Ekadashi and came to Naradvan. I set off from there after the *hindola* festival. I celebrated Pavitra Ekadashi at Haridwar. For Janmashtmi I stayed at Tapovan. I changed the sacred thread in Lakshmanpur. Shrinagar was the place where I celebrated Ganesh Chaturthi, Uddhavvan was the venue of Rishi Panchmi. Jal Jhilani Ekadashi and Vaman Dwadashi I observed at Guptakashi. For Shraddh Paksh I reached Guptaprayag. I completed Shraddh Paksh at Kedarnath. Navratri was on the road. On the ninth day of Navratri I reached this place. I celebrated the Manekthari Punam festival here. As it is your ardent desire I shall be here for Annakut."

The priest was lapping up each word as if they were drops of nectar. He was

shedding tears, wondering as to how this child yogi with such a delicate body could have undertaken such a hazardous journey. He said, "Varniraj, now you stay here. Don't go away from here." Nilkanth did not say anything. He merely shook his head.

Nilkanth celebrated Deepotsav and the Annakut festivals at Badrinath. After eating the consecrated food of the Annakut festival, he set out for Jyotirmath. The priest was also going to Jyotirmath, 18 miles below, as Badrinath was closed for the winter months. He made Varni sit on the golden howdah of a richly caparisoned elephant. Two bearers fanned Nilkanth with golden flywhisks. He was made to sit in front whereas the priest took the back seat.

There was a beautiful bungalow at Jyotirmath. It had a garden with fruit and flower bearing trees. The priest offered the bungalow to Nilkanth and told him he could stay there permanently. Nilkanth had no desire for any wealth or mundane comforts. He told the priest, "I have accepted your devotion. Whatever you have asked for I have given. Now I have to go from here to the Himalayas, where Nar-Narayan rishi performs austerities. After staying there for a few months I shall come here again." The priest stood speechless. Varni was going to a place where no humans lived during that part of the year because the whole area was covered with snow. People were evacuating Badrinath whereas the young Brahmachari wanted to go north! He told Varni, "Maharaj, no human being can go there. Nobody even thinks of going there." Varni smiled and said, "I am not human. I am determined to go there. If you are unable to show me the way, I will go on my own." The priest realised that Varni was firm and would not brook any obstacle or objection.

He at once got flowers and sandalwood paste and worshipped the young

Brahmachari. He presented him with a thick woollen blanket to keep him warm. Nilkanth was greatly pleased by the priest's devotion. He cast a glance at him and blessed him. The priest took leave of Varni with folded hands and said, "Maharaj! Please come again. I shall serve you with devotion. You are Narayan himself, otherwise nobody would enter Death's door." Nilkanth left the place and disappeared in no time, to the surprise of onlookers.

3. At Nar-Narayan Rishi's Ashram

1792-93

Nar-Narayan Rishi were delighted that the supreme God himself was coming to sanctify their ashram in the form of the young Brahmachari. The *murti* which everyone would like to keep constantly in view was presenting himself. Both the rishis had been meditating upon his divine form for countless years. Nilkanth was coming in his physical form to their ashram to confer blessings on the people of this land. The rishis started making preparations to accord Varni a befitting welcome.

Varni had emaciated his body through severe austerities. He was passing through snowfields without footwear. He was alone. Seeing thus Narayan rishi became restless. He shouted, "Is anyone there?" Nar rishi came at once. Then Narayan rishi said, "The cause of all avatars, the supreme God, is coming towards our ashram. So go and alert the wind-god and Himalaya (Himgiri) that God should not have any difficulty and should be brought here."

Nar rishi at once rushed to Himalaya to convey Narayan rishi's message. The lord of the mountains and snow was delighted that he would be sanctified as the supreme God walked on him. The wind-god reduced his speed. Himalaya appeared as a deva before Nilkanth Varni. He saw Varni from far and recognised him.

"In my extensive snowy domain no man comes walking. He must surely be God as Nar rishi has mentioned," Himgiri thought. He came near Nilkanth and sat with folded hands, "O God! Nar-Narayan Dev has ordered me, so I have come before you. I wish to act as your carrier or bring a carrier of your wish."

Varni smiled on hearing his sentiments and said, "One must perform pilgrimage on foot."

Meanwhile, Nar rishi and other sages came. All of them prostrated before Nilkanth Varni. They placed a variety of fruits at his feet. Varni was happy to see the rishis and all of them walked together.

A Frigid Lake

They then came to a lake which was so cold that anybody bathing in it would freeze to death. Nilkanth expressed his desire to bathe in the lake. Nar rishi and the other sages said, "O Brahmachari! Your body has become so emaciated due to vigorous austerities. And besides, you are not accustomed to this extreme cold. So, it will be good if you do not bathe." But Nilkanth desired to make this a holy place for all rishis. That was why he at once jumped into the lake. The rishis were greatly surprised. They also jumped into the lake to bathe. The Sun-god (Surya Dev) thought that it was the appropriate moment for him to serve the Lord. He came at once in a human form and stood besides Varni when he came out. Nilkanth felt that his body was getting warmer. He looked at Surya Dev. The Sun-god offered his prostrations. Varni told him, "You inspire your disciples with the knowledge of my divine form. I shall install your *murti* in mandirs." Surya Dev was very happy. Then he disappeared.

Nilkanth performed his ritual worship and offered food to the Shaligram. He

and the other sages walked ten miles a day and after 20 to 25 days they arrived at the beautiful Badrivan. Varni was immensely pleased to see its natural splendour. It looked as if the trees had their fill of mother earth's bounty and were laden with fruits and flowers. The whole atmosphere was fragrant with the scent of flowers. Nilkanth was delighted to see the place. He said, "There is no place like this in the entire country of India."

When he approached the Nar Narayan ashram, Nilkanth offered a prostration. Meanwhile, Narayan rishi came rushing and embraced the young Brahmachari. There was a shower of flowers and the sound of victory calls from the heavens. Strains of heavenly music were soon heard. Narayan rishi was ecstatic. He could not take his eyes off Nilkanth. He was shedding tears of joy. So overjoyed was he that he was not able to speak. The other rishis touched Varni's feet and felt blessed. Nar-Narayan rishis held Nilkanth's hands and took him to the ashram. Varni sanctified the ashram on Wednesday, 7 November 1792 (A.S. 1849, Kartik *vad* 8). Nar-Narayan and the other great sages felt blessed by Varni's arrival.

Narayan Rishi offered Varni a beautiful, elevated seat. He himself sat in front of Nilkanth. Other sages sat on either side. As the sun set Agni Dev saw to it that there was enough light for the rishis to see Varni's resplendent face. Agni Dev produced a lot of wooden torches. The light cast by the torches was so powerful that people thought it was day time.

Gratitude Expressed

Shri Narayan Rishi said, "O Lord of Akshar, this Himalayan path (of snow) is a very difficult route. No man can come here. Only those who have the grace of

Kedarnath Bhagwan can come this far. They are invariably siddhas. The cold is so severe that it virtually penetrates the bones. You have come here to bestow your grace on us and we are extremely grateful for it."

On hearing the supplication of Narayan Rishi Nilkanth said, "You are the ruler of Bharat Khand. With the motive of performing austerities I have come here for your darshan."

There is wisdom and politeness in God's words. These virtues are absorbed by those who drink his words with reverence and glory. Narayan Rishi was aware that Varni is the supreme God. He had the knowledge of his glory. He worshipped Varni day and night. And his *murti* was his goal in life. Therefore he said, "One who knows your glory and greatness is himself great. One who thinks that we are greater than you does not know your glory."

On seeing the devotion of Narayan rishi and the other rishis Varni felt like staying there. The place was ideal for performing devotion. Varni stayed at Badrivan for three months. He did not take any food. He undertook austerities to redeem those who were eager to attain salvation.

After performing intense austerities Varni thought of leaving the place. He asked Narayan Rishi, "Where should I go from here?"

The venerable Rishi replied, "You are the supreme Lord of Lords, but since you have asked me I am telling you with utmost respect for you. In order to attain your objective for which you have revealed yourself, you should undertake a tour of the entire Bharat Varsh (India). Then in the west Narad Muni will meet you. And then Uddhavji. Then you will attain your goal – the establishment of Ekantik Dharma. This dharma has not been established since the creation of the universe. It will be established through you."

Then the Lord of Badrivan (Narayan Rishi) worshipped Nilkanth with the sixteen objects of worship. The rishis garlanded him with flowers, offered fruits and prostrated before him. It was time for him to leave. The three-month stay of Nilkanth had given the rishis immense happiness. They all understood the Supreme divinity of Varni. By his grace their austerities bore fruits, but now they could not withstand the pain of parting. Till the attainment of the spiritually realised state *(brahmi-sthiti)* they would not be able to experience his form eternally in their hearts. The all-knowing Varni realised this. He told them with a smile, "Feelings like distance and separation, which are born of ignorance, will vanish." After being blessed the rishis bid the Varni farewell.

After taking a step, he stopped, and turning to Nar-Narayan Rishis said, "O respected Rishis, you have rendered great service to me. I shall see to it that your *murtis* are installed in Bharat Khand." The venerable rishis offered respectful *pranams* to Varni who then proceeded on his journey.

Nilkanth was thinking as to how dharma had deteriorated due to the corrupting effect of age after age. But it was because of him that evil had come to be exposed. And that was why the times had become adverse. But Nilkanth had come with a mission to establish Ekantik Dharma and destroy evil. He walked determinedly ahead to fulfil his mission.

The great rishis who were watching Nilkanth go were rooted to the spot. With a steady step Varni went on his way. No place was inaccessible to him. Till now though he had been inaccessible to others, today he became accessible for aspirants so that they could attain moksha. With this thought Nilkanth smiled with an inner joy.

* * *

Nilkanth wished to see the swans that lived on the banks of Mansarovar. He desired to create *paramhansas* who were like those white swans. It is said that a swan can separate milk from water. Similarly, a *paramhansa* can remove the mundane desires from the souls and unveil the presence of God within. It was his intention to set up and propagate Ekantik Dharma through such *paramhansas*. Thinking thus, he reached Mansarovar.

At Mansarovar

Nilkanth was delighted by the vast expanse of Mansarovar's placid waters. Red lotuses were in full bloom. There were a number of waterfowls bathing in the lake. He saw swans on the banks. The grace of the swans reflected the temperament of the rishis of Badrivan. The atmosphere was filled with birdsongs and the rustling breeze which provided an ideal accompaniment. The ripples were making wavy patterns. The wind carried the scent of flowers and fruits. Nilkanth liked the place very much. This was nature's unique work. It was created by his power. He bathed in the freezing waters of the holy lake.

As soon as he completed his ablutions, Himalaya brought fruits and flowers. Nilkanth performed puja and offered them to the Shaligram. He distributed them as *prasad* to the lord of the mountains and ate a little himself. Varni stayed there for five days. He played with the swans which were called Raj-*hansas* (royal swans) because of their snow-white plumage. He gave them food and sprinkled holy water on them. When Varni was preparing to leave, the swans started looking at him. They seemed to be asking, "The supreme God has given us his darshan here but when shall he meet us again?" Nilkanth understood their sentiments and instructed, "Come to the West (Gujarat), the place saturated with the devotion of devotees

is going to be my mission field. People will be redeemed there. I shall stay there and grant moksha to my devotees."

Nilkanth left Mansarovar for Badrinath He reached Badrinath on the auspicious day of Monday, 13 May 1793 (A.S. 1849, Vaishakh *sud* 3) and had darshan of the deity. The mandir priest recognised him immediately and prostrated before him. When it was announced that food was ready for consecration and distribution as *prasad*, Nilkanth replied, "I had my last meal before starting from here and shall eat again today." Then the priest of Jyotirmath came there and was happy to have Nilkanth's darshan.

While eating Nilkanth related the experiences of his journey. He told them how he reached Badrivan despite the freezing cold, his darshan of Nar-Narayan Rishis, their rigorous austerities, their devotion to him, and of Badrivan which had been sanctified by the austerities of many other rishis. He also told them of how every pious wish was fulfilled at that sacred place. Everyone had to subsist on fruits at Badrivan. Those who were listening to Varni's account were greatly surprised and said, "You are indeed God. Since it is difficult for any human to go to the Himalayas and Badrivan." Nilkanth was listening. Then he said, "This place is Badripati's territory. Here, austerities, detachment and devotion prevail. The priest asked Varni, "Where did you go from there?" Nilkanth spoke at length about his pilgrimage to Mansarovar (for details see appendix).

A Royal Visitor

Maharaja Ranjitsinh of Punjab arrived for darshan in Badrinath. The moment the Sikh ruler saw Nilkanth he was greatly drawn by his personality and experienced divine bliss. The king could not take another step to go to the mandir as he

had intended going there for darshan. Instead, he went to where Varni was. He prostrated before him and touched his lotus feet. Everyone was surprised. Nilkanth was recounting his experiences of Mansarovar to the people who were sitting around him. The king was captivated by Varni's graceful and divine presence and was enchanted by his voice. He would not let go of his feet. He kept on praising Varni and said, "I shall not let you go. You have revealed yourself to redeem millions of people. Please do not desert me." Nilkanth took note of his sentiments. But a mere look at his dress proclaimed the king to be steeped in worldly pleasures. He realised that the king and he were at the two ends of the spectrum. He had renounced the world whereas the king was deeply involved in it. Varni told the king, "I am inclined to those who are devout and pious. If you become a devotee, then I will be under your control. But the fact is I am a yogi, whereas you are a *bhogi* (one who indulges in mundane life). Until we become like-minded our ideas and nature cannot meet."

Ranjitsinh became sad on hearing Varni's words. But he was eager to attain salvation. With folded hands he addressed Nilkanth, "Maharaj, I shall carry out whatever you command me to do. But stay in my heart forever." Varni was convinced of the king's sincerity and said, "I have to go to Gangotri. After that I shall meet you wherever you are. Now you may go." The king was greatly distressed on hearing the order. He nevertheless left the place, experiencing a fever in his body as a consequence of the separation. The king constantly remembered Nilkanth during his pilgrimage to other places.

After visiting Gangotri, Nilkanth returned to Haridwar. Meanwhile, Ranjitsinh also came there. He was still unhappy by the separation from Nilkanth. Ranjitsinh enquired about Varni and on being told of his presence in Haridwar, he

at once started searching for him. On seeing him the king was overjoyed. He gave up his regalia and walked for his darshan.

Ranjitsinh had Nilkanth's darshan at Har-ki-Pedi. Varni was sitting with his eyes closed, in deep meditation. His hands were resting on his knees. The crown of hair tied in a knot added to the splendour of his appearance. The king ran forward and fell at Varni's feet. The mere touch acted as a soothing balm to the king's agitated soul. His fever subsided. Nilkanth opened his eyes and his sight fell on Ranjitsinh. The king experienced peace within. He had decided to give up all worldly pleasures and lead a simple life. The pomp and pageantry that exist with royalty now appeared fake to the king. He completely surrendered himself to Nilkanth. Nilkanth realised that Ranjitsinh was a totally changed man. He was happy to see him. He wanted to give him an opportunity to serve him. "I am hungry. Bring me whatever is readily available," he said. Ranjitsinh was greatly pleased at this. He instructed his servants to bring eatables. Soon they brought delicacies, sweets, etc., laden on gold trays. Nilkanth ate a little and returned the rest. In spite of having the prolonged darshan of Nilkanth the king's thirst for it seemed just unquenchable.

Ranjitsinh said with folded hands, "Maharaj! This royal splendour is temporary. Even my body is subject to decay. You alone are eternal. If you stay in my *atma* then only will I be redeemed. Otherwise, the *atma* will again get enmeshed in the endless cycle of births and deaths." Nilkanth placed his hand on the monarch's head. Ranjitsinh at once experienced a calm that stilled all the agitations that were troubling his mind. He realised the divine form of Nilkanth. Varni, pointing to himself, said, "There is no *murti* greater than this. If this is permanently enshrined in your heart, your kingdom will not be of bondage to you."

With a bowed head the Sikh ruler felt blessed with Varni's words. Nilkanth fulfilled his wish and stayed with him for two days. He blessed the king and came once again to Ayodhya.

4. Returns to Ayodhya and Proceeds Northwards

1793

A Brief Stay in Ayodhya

Nilkanth had left home almost a year ago. He returned to Ayodhya in 1793, as the month of Vaishakh was coming to an end in Ashadhi Samvat 1849. He wished to visit Kalapahad (Black Mountain), Shvetgiri and Muktinath. The route from here was easier. Nilkanth realised that life in Ayodhya had returned to normal. Now there was no question of anyone having lost someone. Everyone was enmeshed in *maya*. People should not be reminded of their earlier days as that would lead to sadness. Now, Nilkanth's mission was different.

Nilkanth had to bring the east and west nearer. He had to make them one. The sun appears to rise everyday at the same place and set at the same place. It was Nilkanth's mission to stop this illusory flow, so that the pious could constantly see God in their hearts. For this it was essential to remove the ignorance in man, born out of his imperfect understanding, and to make him acquainted with the grand, divine power of God.

After staying secretly for a few days in Ayodhya Nilkanth got up early one morning and prepared to cross the Saryu. He glanced at the town, shook his head

and smiled slightly. *Maya* owed its existence to him. And today it was creating obstacles to prevent people from knowing his true self. Thinking thus Nilkanth smiled to himself.

Nilkanth came to the river bank. The river was overwhelmed with joy. Things had not been the same for the river since Varni had left her about a year ago. The resplendent Brahmachari sanctified the Saryu with his lotus feet at its source in Mansarovar. The river was besides herself with joy and started a wild dance in ecstasy to greet him. The waves were rising high, so high that they would frighten even a brave heart. Varni understood the sentiment of the river and plunged into its waters. That calmed her. Within no time Nilkanth swam to the opposite bank.

After walking along the bank for some distance, Nilkanth sat down to rest. When he resumed the journey, he reached a village called Haraiya. He thought, "I shall rest here tonight and resume my journey in the morning." Thinking thus he reached the main gate of the village. Near the gate was a shop of a sweet-food dealer. His aged mother saw Nilkanth and she was impressed with Varni. Meanwhile, all the residents of the village, young and old alike, gathered at the spot for Nilkanth's darshan. He became the centre of attraction. The young Brahmachari's body had become emaciated because of intense austerities. But he was radiating the glow which one usually associates with yogis. The sweet-food dealer's mother came there and requested Varni, "Brahmachariji, please come here. Our shop is just nearby. Please stay there for the night." Nilkanth appreciated her sentiments and went inside the shop to spend the night. The shop was filled with the fragrance of sweets. She offered him a beautiful seat and asked, "How did you come here? Did you cross the river Saryu?" Nilkanth replied with a simple yes. "Brahmachariji, will you eat

something?" "My stomach is full as I have swallowed a lot of water while crossing the river," Nilkanth replied. The old woman tried to coax him, "Here son, eat some sweets. You must be tired and hungry." Nilkanth looked at the old lady. Immediately she experienced his divine presence in samadhi and saw his four-armed form.

The old woman was now fully convinced of Nilkanth's divinity. On awakening from the samadhi she saw Nilkanth finish offering the sweets to the Shaligram and partaking a little thereof. She wanted to pay him proper respect by touching his feet. When she approached him Varni withdrew his feet. She was greatly surprised. She had seen several great sages and *bawas*, and none of them ever withdrew their feet when she wanted to touch them. Yet this young Brahmachari was withdrawing his feet. She felt a bit puzzled and asked, "You are God, therefore allow me the benefit of touching your feet."

Nilkanth replied to her with a smile, "I have taken the vow of an ascetic. I cannot allow a woman to touch me. It is prohibited."

"Many ascetics visit us. They let me touch their feet. They allow me to wash their feet. What is this new practice you have started?" the woman asked.

Nilkanth thought it was not proper for him to argue with the old woman. He prepared to leave but she would not let him go. She plied him with questions, "First tell me who you are? Where are your father, mother, brother, sister-in-law and other relatives? Don't they miss you and search for you?" Nilkanth thought the best way was to cut short the conversation. He felt that mundane people always thought of family ties. So, he replied, "I have neither parents nor brothers, sisters-in-law and relatives. I roam around in splendid isolation in a blissful spiritual state as a Brahmachari!" The old woman did not understand any of this. She said, "The night

has advanced. Sleep here." Nilkanth came out of the shop. He spread his deerskin on a platform outside the house and sat in a meditative posture.

He sat contemplating his true self. The night had advanced far. He went into a divine sleep, with his left hand under his head as a pillow. He rested his right leg on the left. This sight could be witnessed only by a few fortunate souls. Varni contorted his body into a small space and hid his splendour.

Nilkanth got up early in the morning and set out on his onward journey. After walking for a long distance he came to a dense forest. Varni was delighted by the grandeur and wealth of the forest. He saw a river and performed his ablutions. He worshipped the Shaligram and left the place. There were tribals living in that forest. A tribal and his wife who were gathering fruits saw the young ascetic. When they saw him roaming alone in the forest, they were curious to know as to who he was. They came near him and gave him some fruits.

Varni offered the fruits to the Shaligram and gave the rest to the tribal couple after eating a little himself. An elderly tribal asked Varni, "You are walking barefoot on this difficult path full of thorns and pebbles at a fast pace. What made you leave home? Why this spirit of renunciation?"

Nilkanth had gone over these questions several times previously. He thought it prudent not to answer such questions. The tribal said once again, "From your appearance you seem to belong to a respectable family." But Nilkanth had stopped thinking of things like caste and family background long ago. His body had no connection with such things. Such distinctions are born out of ignorance. A true sadhu does not bother about these things. He had identified the body with his *atma*. There are many sadhus, sannyasis and yogis, and if they continue to make these distinctions, then they are not true sadhus.

Nilkanth's mission was to establish real renunciation in the world. For that purpose, he resumed his journey. When the tribals saw him go, they were greatly surprised.

Nilkanth kept on walking. Night fell. He spent the night in the forest. He got up in the morning, had his bath, collected ripe fruits that were found on the ground, offered them to God and ate a little himself. He started on his journey once again.

After walking for nine hours he came to another forest. A river was passing through it. The river was rushing between two cliffs. The water had formed a whirlpool. There was no way for the water to recede. Nilkanth was overjoyed to see such a turbulent river. He got on to the cliff and plunged into the current. The rush of water was so strong that he was flung on to the bank. But he did not give up. He once again jumped into the raging current. Who can stop the progress of him who has revealed himself to take people safely across the river of *maya*. Even a rampaging torrent cannot. He once again plunged into the river and swimming in the eddies he crossed it and landed on the opposite bank. There he sat under a vast tree in a meditative posture. The sun was about to set. The evening appeared splendid. Slowly darkness began to envelop the landscape. Nilkanth, the effulgent Brahmachari, sat contemplating his true self.

Nilkanth Visits Vanshipur

Early next morning, Nilkanth had his bath and sat under a pipal tree for his morning rituals of worship. He was soon absorbed in meditation. At that time the King of Vanshipur was out hunting. He saw something under the pipal tree and took it for an animal. God inspired him to have a second thought. The king told

his men, "Let me go and see what it is. If it is not an animal and if I kill it, it will be a disaster." Saying this the king came to the pipal tree and saw the splendid figure of a Brahmachari engaged in meditation. His closed eyes resembled lotus petals, his face looked as handsome as the moon, his body seemed soft like a lotus and he was beautiful to look at. The king, a true spiritual seeker, was delighted to see the child yogi. The knowledge he had acquired in his previous birth came surging back. He realised that though young in years the Brahmachari was a great sage. He at once recognised Varni. He thought, "Narayan has come in this form to redeem me." Saying this he fell at his feet. Nilkanth opened his eyes and saw the king. He smiled. The king folded his hands and said, "Oh! God, you have enriched me with your darshan. Please come to my house and bless our souls." Nilkanth took note of the king's sentiments. He agreed to go with the king.

A Visit to the King's Palace

The king made Nilkanth sit with him on his horse. When the king brought Varni like this to where his attendants were waiting, they were greatly surprised. When they saw the young Brahmachari they were convinced that he was no ordinary soul, but a great yogi. Everybody's attention was now focused on Varni. When the king arrived in his city thousands flocked to the streets to have his darshan. They offered their *pranams* with reverence to Nilkanth. The king escorted him to his court. The queen was extremely glad to see the distinguished guest. The queen realised that the Brahmachari was no yogi, *yati,* god but the supreme God himself. She was greatly attracted by his young, beatific figure. The royal couple had no son. She felt as if Varni had arrived to fulfil their desire of becoming their heir. The king helped Varni get off the horse and led him into the palace. There his two

daughters, Sushila and Ila, came to join their parents and welcome Varni. They too were greatly overjoyed by his darshan.

Nilkanth entered the palace. He washed his feet, hands and face with clean water. The queen got several delicacies prepared. Varni placed the Shaligram on a low table and offered the food. Then he placed a little in an eating bowl, poured water into it and started eating it. The royal couple felt greatly blessed as Nilkanth, the divine child yogi, had lunch at their palace. But the queen began to think in a selfish way and wanted to detain Varni in Vanshipur by handing over the kingdom to him and to make him her son-in-law by giving her daughters in marriage to him. This appeared a very splendid idea to her.

The merits of the royal couple from their previous births were very strong. That was why Varni had agreed to stay in the royal palace. In his journey across the country so far he had not stayed at anybody's house. However, Varni had immediately honoured the king's invitation. How fortunate the king and queen were! Nilkanth knew about the thoughts the queen was entertaining in her mind. But Nilkanth's thoughts did not match with her's. Mere mortals could not understand Nilkanth's inclinations.

Daily, the royal family, including the two princesses became engaged in serving Nilkanth. The young princesses would bring and arrange articles of daily worship like fruits, flowers, incense, etc. by the time Nilkanth had his bath. They would prepare sweets for *prasad*. Once the worship rituals were over, Nilkanth would offer food to Thakorji. He would then eat a little. The princesses would invariably be present when he was eating. They would serve him with affection. But his unnatural way of eating (after mixing everything with water) caused great surprise to all.

Varni would sometimes talk about his own experiences. At other times he would talk of the past and future. Whatever be the subject people would imbibe every word of what he had to say. The royal couple would eat only after Nilkanth had his food. The king and the queen had a desire to keep Varni in their kingdom. Varni also had a desire to bless them with ultimate salvation. The king and queen realised that Varni never touched worldly subjects which brought material gain. So, they were not very sure whether they would succeed in their efforts to detain Nilkanth and hand over the reins of their kingdom to him.

The Proposal

As days passed by, the king, queen and their daughters became very friendly with Nilkanth. In so allowing, Nilkanth wanted to put them on the path of salvation. One day, the queen became restless. She came to Nilkanth and said, "Brahmachariji, I would like to hand over this kingdom to you. You can also marry my daughters. So give up this botheration of going to the forest for austerities."

Varni smiled after hearing what she had to say. He replied, "Mother! My austerities will end in the west. I have come here because of your merits. It is a great fortune for you people." Varni kept quiet for some time and then said, "I wish to roam in the forest so that I can redeem fortunate souls like you."

The queen was agitated on hearing this. "Nilkanth will go to the forest!" she thought. "But I will not allow this gem of a *brahmachari* to go away." She was so enamoured of his personality that she had forgotten his divine self. She told him, "O Brahmachari, think carefully. When you become a youth you will not be able to live without a woman. Great ascetics have yielded to Kamdev (lord of lust). Do you

think he will spare you? Whatever pleasures God has given you should enjoy them."

This reasoning fell flat on Varni's ears. His stay at the palace was only a part of his goodwill journey. He knew it, but she did not. The young Brahmachari took pity on the queen. He told her, "True pleasure lies in roaming in the forests, mountains, rivers and in thinking of God."

On hearing this the queen felt as if the ground was moving from under her feet. Varni is going away? She said with natural concern, "Brahmachariji, you have not yet seen the valleys of the Himalayas, or the dense forests with fierce beasts. You have not heard their spine-chilling roars or the snowfall that freezes the body. These are all terribly frightening." The queen had affection for Varni. However, it was born not out of reverence but out of ignorance. That was why what she said was aimed to scare Varni and dissuade him from going ahead with his journey.

But Nilkanth had no fear and said, "Mother, I am the supreme God. I have revealed myself to redeem people from the web of *maya* and to transport my devotees to my blissful Akshardham. I have not come here to be bound by your kingdom or by your daughters. You have shown affection for me and have served me with devotion. I, therefore, give you my word that I have come here to give you my Akshardham."

The queen, who uptil then was ensnared by *maya*, saw the light at last. She now realised the true form of Nilkanth. Her inner eyes were opened. Nilkanth is not just a *brahmachari* but the supreme God himself. She is not merely a woman but *atma*. She experienced a divine, blissful trance. Varni seized the opportunity and left to go to his quarters. When the queen came out of the samadhi she realised that tears were raining from her eyes.

Sushila and Ila had seen the power of Varni. That he was not an ordinary *brahmachari* was reflected in the glow on his face and his general appearance. They thought it was time they talked about it to their mother. They told her, "Mother, this pure, divine being has come to our house on his own. Serve him keeping his wishes in mind. Don't insist upon anything. He can never be tied down by anyone. Nor can he be obstructed from doing what he considers to be proper. Mother, give up this love born out of illusion and treasure him in your heart with true love."

These words of wisdom coming from the princesses were like nectar to the queen. She had seen the true form of Nilkanth while in samadhi. One who considered the entire universe to be worth a blade of grass, can he ever be interested in her petty kingdom or the worldly comforts it offered? She decided then and there that she would serve Varni with devotion so that he will not feel disgusted at her worldly ways and desert them. The queen said, "Children, what you say is true. The ignorant woman that I am, I tried to enmesh the Brahmachari in the coils of *maya*. But he is above all this. He cannot be tainted by any worldly desires. He is above mundane passions. He has come to give all eternal bliss. With our limited knowledge we cannot understand his greatness." The queen continued to shed tears. She decided that thereafter she would act in a way that pleased Varni. She would not insist upon anything. She wiped her tears and left the place.

Sushila and Ila went to Nilkanth's quarters. Varni was sitting in meditation. The sisters tiptoed into the room and had his darshan. Then they made his bed quietly, and before leaving placed the water container and some fruits.

Nilkanth sat meditating for a long time. He had lost count of time. The evening had turned into night. Soon it was midnight. Suddenly he woke up.

There was an eerie silence occasionally broken by the howl of a dog or jackal. The main gate of the palace was closed.

Varni thought that the royal family were spiritually inclined souls but they were bound to worldly attachments. But despite that, he would redeem them. Believing his work to be completed, Nilkanth decided to proceed ahead. There were innumerable people who wanted to get out of the web of *maya*. They were awaiting his arrival for that purpose. With these thoughts the young Brahmachari picked up the few items he usually carried with him and left to resume his unfinished journey. He came down and the huge gate opened of itself. Nilkanth vanished in a flash.

At daybreak, Sushila and Ila came to Nilkanth's quarters. They found the bed empty. It had no trace of folds or creases. The fruits and water they had brought the previous evening were as they were. Nilkanth's belongings – the deerskin, the *kamandal* and Shaligram – were missing. They were convinced that Varni had left the palace. Both the princesses became greatly distressed. They came down to their parents' room. The king was still sleeping. The sisters were in tears when they saw their mother. "Why are you crying?" she asked them. "Nilkanth has gone away, mother." The statement came as a shock to the queen. She could not believe her ears.

On hearing the news, the queen exclaimed, "Has Nilkanth gone away!" Saying this she fainted and fell to the ground. The king woke up on hearing the noise. There was great confusion and commotion in the palace.

The king asked his daughters, "What happened, Sushila? Why are you all crying?"

"Nilkanth has gone away," she replied between sobs. The words came as a bolt

from the blue for the king. He became speechless for a moment!

The king's servants began gathering around him. The word of Nilkanth's sudden absence had spread far and wide and people gathered before the palace. The king regained his composure and told his officers, "Send out horsemen in different directions. Ten on each side. Let them search for Nilkanth and not return without him."

The horsemen galloped off in different directions. But there was no trace of Nilkanth. They searched for 30 miles in each direction. But Nilkanth could not be found. He felt a pall of sadness as the kindly figure of Nilkanth rose before his mind's eye. Nilkanth had gone away! He took a deep breath.

When Nilkanth realised that the king and other members of the royal family took his departure to heart, he announced from the sky, "You will be born in the royal family at Maliya near Morbi in Saurashtra. You will then have the benefit of my darshan. I shall visit your royal court with my sadhus."

Towards Kala Parvat

It was the month of Ashadh in 1794 (A.S. 1850). The monsoon was in full swing. Nilkanth proceeded hastily on his journey like an arrow discharged from a bow. Mother Earth was delighted at the touch of his lotus feet. When else could she have this pleasure? As if to celebrate this event and make the most of it, Mother Earth donned a green mantle. There were no villages on way to Kala Parvat.

Along the way Varni found some windfall fruits for food. As for a place to rest there was a green bed made of leaves with a sprinkling of flowers that were spreading their fragrance for him to sleep on. It was a trackless route on which no human being

would venture. Nilkanth proceeded at a brisk pace, humming tunes from the *Geet Govind.*

By revealing himself Nilkanth had provided an opportunity to the gods to serve him. He was especially happy with the wind-god and would throw a glance at him now and then. With this the wind-god reduced his speed. And the atmosphere remained charged with the fragrance of flowers and fruits.

Varni took the fruits on the ground for food and at night slept on the bed of leaves made by the wind-god. The gods of nature had conformed themselves to Nilkanth. They had subsided their turbulent ways. For a month, Varni proceeded on with his journey. He came to the valley of Kala Parvat which contained a dense forest. There was total darkness even during day time. As Nilkanth walked on the bed of leaves, snakes would come out, sway their outstretched hoods and after some time go on their way and vanish into the surrounding darkness. The foliage was so thick that the sun's rays hardly penetrated the canopy of trees.

Wild animals like rhinos and buffalos ran here and there on seeing Nilkanth, whom they considered to be a queer creature. Some would come near him, bow their heads and trot away, as if paying homage to him. This set him thinking, "If wild creatures have the knowledge to recognise the divine, then how much greater the intelligence of humans must be!" But unfortunately, man's knowledge has been dwarfed by his arrogance. That is why he is unable to recognise God and his Sadhu. The animals on the other hand being simple and straightforward do not suffer from such a drawback. Varni thought of the mango tree that soared skywards and wondered if man ever had such ambition for his betterment. Or whether to achieve his soaring worldly ambition man will forever remain a dwarf. Engrossed in such thoughts Nilkanth lost direction towards Pulhashram!

Nilkanth walked for three days without a trace of water or fruits. He became very weak and found it difficult even to stand. He became unconscious and fell down. On awakening he recouped strength and saw a river at a distance. He crawled upto the river bank and took a bath. He offered fruits to the Shaligram and ate a little himself. After resting for a while, he resumed his journey. As the sun was setting, Varni stopped under a huge banyan tree and performed his evening prayer and chanting. It was Krishna Janmashtmi of 1794 (A.S. 1850). It had been exactly one year and 43 days since he left home.

5. In Nepal

1793-1795

Destination Muktinath

Nilkanth Varni sat meditating under a tree and remembered Hanumanji. Hanumanji appeared at once and stood before Varni with folded hands. He was pleased at Hanumanji's service and at his beckoning he climbed up a tree and sat there.

It started raining slightly and a cold wind was blowing. The gurgling sound of mountain streams could be heard. Varni was very happy with this atmospheric condition. Nature had put on a friendly appearance. But when it assumes its terrible aspect, its form changes. Man's true form is his own *atma.* Its nature is *sat, chit* and *anand.* But because of *rajogun* and *tamogun,* man's cool nature is changed and he forgets his true form. It was his mission to remind man of his true form by lifting the veil of *maya*. His Akshardham (Mulji Sharma) has revealed himself in the west to make man free from ignorance and the bonds of *maya*. Nilkanth was engrossed in these thoughts.

The whole place was enveloped in abysmal darkness. The fireflies flitted around to have darshan of Nilkanth. The wild animals were running here and there. The

roars of tigers, cheetah and other ferocious animals were heard now and then. Sometimes, the cries of animals caught in the jaws of its predators could also be heard. A cobra with its hood was swaying before Nilkanth. But Nilkanth was engrossed in his divine self.

Then suddenly, Kalbhairav appeared with a terrible, spine-chilling cry. He was accompanied by an army of demons, witches and ghosts. On hearing his roar Hanumanji was startled. He immediately jumped from the tree and sat before Nilkanth. Even in the midst of darkness, Bhairav's red eyes, resembling hot copper, proclaimed his terrible aspect. He was wearing a garland of bones around his neck. His mouth was dripping with the blood and flesh of birds and animals he had freshly devoured. He had a trident in his hand. The other hand was carrying a struggling victim of his hunt. His companions were enacting a macabre dance around him.

On seeing Nilkanth and Hanumanji Kalbhairav told his army, "Some man is sitting in front of us. A monkey is also sitting before him. Both are our food. Go and get them."

Hanumanji thought that the demons would soon pounce upon Varni. So he increased his body into a giant. He caught hold of all the demons with his enormous tail and flung them high into the air. The demons screamed as they took fight and crashed to the ground.

When Kalbhairav saw Hanumanji assuming a giant form and destroying his army he turned wild. He, too, increased his body. He opened his mouth, which resembled a cave of a huge mountain, and rushed towards Hanumanji. Instantly, Hanumanji hit him on the head with his powerful fist. The force of the blow was such that Bhairav's head sank into his body. With a loud yell the demon fell to the

ground. On seeing the end of Bhairav, the rest of his band fled the scene.

Kalbhairav was defeated. But Nilkanth began to think. It is because of their ego and arrogance that the malevolent deities cannot recognise the form of God. Not only that they inspire human beings to undertake various practices to feed their passions. He felt that only when they come out of this ignorance would they start worshipping him and become entitled to salvation.

After destroying Bhairav through Hanumanji, Nilkanth resumed his journey towards Nepal in the north.

Nilkanth desired to reach Muktinath. The route was difficult. There was no short cut or easy way to Muktinath. He felt that he should first reach the river Kali Gandki and proceed along its bank to arrive at Muktinath. That's why, he trekked ahead towards the Kali Gandki. The river flows near the village of Baleva. On reaching the village he had a glimpse of the river. He was delighted by the sight. The young Brahmachari bathed in the river and bathed the Shaligram, too. He sat in meditation for a while and spent the night there.

The next day he started walking towards the north along the Gandki bank. The route was tough and challenging. He had to negotiate dense forests and cross paths precariously perched atop deep valleys, so deep that the eye could not reach them. But these aspects of nature did not frighten Varni. He went on and crossed the place called Tatopani and then lost his way. He felt as if he was walking in a gorge.

This gorge between Kala Parvat and Shvetgiri peaks is believed to be the deepest in the world. He saw the two mountains close to each other, looking as if they were showing their affection in a tight embrace. Between them was a cave and a torrent issuing from it. He found that he had got into the valley and if he returned now

he would miss Muktinath. He was steadfast in his resolve and bent on performing austerities in Muktinath, no matter how insurmountable the difficulties. He had to pay respects to Bharat's (son of King Rishabhdev) austerities. He had to please the sun-god. No path was in sight, except the torrent between Kala Parvat and Shvetgiri to reach Muktinath. He was aware of this tortuous route. Nilkanth sat pondering what to do.

At that time a man came there, prostrated before Nilkanth and stood before him with folded hands. Nilkanth Varni looked at him in surprise and asked, "Who are you? This place is such that no human being can come here."

The man replied, "Maharaj, nothing is unknown to you. You have assumed a human form and therefore like an ordinary man you are asking this question. I am Himalaya. I have assumed a human form to have your darshan and to serve you. Owing to my austerities you have given me darshan. I am grateful for that."

Nilkanth Varni was looking at the manifestation of Himalaya. Then he said, "I have to go to the ashram where Brahma's son, Pulah, had performed his austerities. Tell me the way to the ashram."

Himgiri (Himalaya) said, "Maharaj, the torrent which is flowing between the two mountains will lead you to that place. But the river is full of poisonous snakes, crabs, turtles and fish. On its banks, the crocodiles await their victims. So, do not go by that route."

Nilkanth Varni was listening calmly, and then stated, "I am not afraid of animals. My aim is to reach Pulhashram."

Himgiri took a deep breath. Nilkanth felt the warm blast from the king of snow's breath and asked, "Why did you sigh?"

"O Lord, you are taking unnecessary trouble to redeem the *jivas*. But the I feel

that people of the world will neither understand your objective nor recognise you. They have not recognised any of the avatars that came before you."

Nilkanth understood why Himgiri had sighed. He assured Himalaya, "You rest assured. The avatars that came before had no way of piercing the causal body. I have revealed myself with my Akshardham. That Aksharbrahma will pierce the causal body of the *jivas* and enable them to recognise the true form of God. Knowingly or unknowingly those *jivas* who come in contact with me will become eligible for final redemption."

Himgiri was greatly surprised to hear this. Nilkanth let Himgiri wonder at what he had said and plunged into the torrent.

At that time there was a tumult in the heavens. There was a severe dust-storm. The very moment Varni plunged into the torrent, the denizens of the river experienced a divine trance. He became happy. He waded through the current all night and came out of the cavern at dawn. There he saw a huge river. The river was supplying the water for the torrent. He saw a number of creatures in the mighty river. He bathed in the river and recited the *Vishnusahasranam.* For three days he had not found any fruits or flowers. But that had not bothered him. He kept a steady pace, whether on land or water. Soon he came across a banana grove by the side of the river. Some bananas were lying on the ground. He picked a few, offered them to the Shaligram and partook of the *prasad*.

At that time 500 naked ascetics arrived. Their guru saw Nilkanth sitting by the stream. He was impressed by Varni's serene demeanour. He came to him and offered his respects. The disciples did likewise. Then all of them sat near Nilkanth. He asked them, "Who are you? And why are you roaming in this forest?"

The chief disciple replied, "This is our guru. He is an expert in Hath Yoga and is able to see far and hear distant voices. All these he acquired through his yogic powers. He is teaching us Hath Yoga." Saying this, he looked at Nilkanth. But these words made no impression on Varni. Then the disciple continued, "The ruler of this region is a disciple of our guru. By his grace the king has also acquired the power to see distant objects and to hear distant voices."

Then the guru said, "You are the all-knowing Lord from whom nothing is hidden. This valley of the Himalayas is a sacred spot. The souls of those who could not attain full stature as yogis take rebirth here. No human can even/r set foot here. Arjun came to this place because of the grace of Bhagwan Krishna. We are all the disciples of Durvasa Rishi. Since we were unable to attain the realised state of yogis we have been born again. It is our good fortune that we have your darshan. Now tell us how we can be blessed and attain God's abode."

Meanwhile, a distinguished-looking personage came there. A mere glance at him convinced Nilkanth that he was someone important and took him to be the king of the region. "Who are you?" Varni asked. The guru introduced him to Nilkanth as his disciple and king of the region whom he had taught Hath Yoga. "As he could see distant objects and hear distant noises, he came to know of your presence and has come here for your darshan."

The king came before Varni who was seated in a yogic posture. The monarch bowed to him and touched his feet. At once he recognised the 16 auspicious signs of God on the sole of Varni's feet. The king was convinced that he was in the presence of God himself. Then on seeing the Srivatsa sign on his chest, the monarch was overjoyed that Varni was none other than God himself.

The king requested Varni in a reverential tone, "Maharaj, please come to our

city and sanctify all of us." Nilkanth replied, "I have a lot of things to do. If I visit every city on the way, then my work will remain incomplete. If you really have faith in me, then keep my *murti* in mind; you will be redeemed." Then Varni got up to leave.

The guru of the ascetics took hold of Nilkanth's hand and prayed, "Maharaj, where are you going without telling us the means to reach God's abode?" Nilkanth smiled and sat down at once.

He told them, "You have mastered Hath Yoga, but it is not the path of redemption for spiritual seekers. Because this achievement results in arrogance. The path of bhakti, in which meditating on God's *murti*, is the best path. You will experience his divine form in samadhi if your devotion is genuine." Nilkanth got some water from the nearby river and sprinkled it on all the ascetics and gave them *bhagvati diksha*. He told them, "If you cannot get clothes, then dress yourselves in tree bark. Don't go about naked. I have given you *bhagvati diksha*, so meditate upon my form. In a short time you will die and will be born as *satsangis,* some as householders and some will become my ascetics. Then you will come into my contact and be blessed with my divine happiness and eternal abode, Akshardham." The king and the 500 ascetics were happy to hear Varni's assurance. They were happy that because of God's grace and direct contact the path to moksha had become easier.

After staying for five days Nilkanth left the place and vanished into the dense jungle. The ascetics beheld Varni's form in their hearts and left with the king.

Varni came to a cliff after walking a distance. He saw the Kali Gandki river flowing deep below. But his route lay to the east of the river bank. He had to get down to the river. But it was a sheer drop and nobody would dare to attempt the

feat. But Varni did not know what fear was. He started coming down from the cliff. When the river was only at a short distance he plunged into it. He swam against the swift current and came to the east of the river from where he saw Mt. Nilgiri (Kalo Parvat (23,698 feet)) and Dhavalgiri (Dholo Parvat (26,811 feet)) were seen to the east. Till he reached the mountain range he walked in the valley. Then he started climbing. The terrain was inhospitable. Nilkanth was a 12-year-old boy when he undertook this Himalayan odyssey. He wore only a loin-cloth and had no other protection against the nerve-numbing cold. He walked barefooted. He lived off nature in whatever she offered by way of fruits.

For days on end, he trudged on without food. It was the rainy season. Sometimes there would be moderate rain and at other times a torrential downpour. The rivers and mountain streams were on the rampage. Added to this was the sheer height of the mountains. One had to climb up and down. If he missed a step, it would mean a plunge of thousands of feet.

After reaching Kagbeni, Nilkanth had a clear view of Muktinath. Nilkanth was delighted to see the lofty peaks of the Himalayas. It looked as if the Himalayas, the home to thousands of rishis, was performing austerities to attain the proximity of God. It stood steadfastly with its locks of hair in the form of peaks and snow-white appearance, making the Himalayas imposing and breath-taking in its beauty. Nilkanth was going at a fast pace to bless the Himalayas and the rishis who were meditating there. The snow showered to welcome Nilkanth.

The Kali Gandki river flows to the north from here. It is called Mul Gandki. The route to Muktinath was to the east. Varni proceeded along this route. At last he arrived at Muktinath, near Mt. Thorang at a height of 17,770 feet. To the south is

Mt. Nilgiri at a height of 21,273 feet. The mandir is in a valley at a height of 12,500 feet. Nilkanth was happy to see Muktinath. There the Gandki flows in a circular fashion, so it is called Chakra Gandki. This stream gets separated from the Kali Gandki. The Vishnu Mandir here is shaped like a Nepali Pagoda. It has a golden *kalash*. The small *murti* of Vishnu is flanked by Bhudevi and Shridevi and attended by Garudji. Nilkanth had darshan of Vishnu, his consorts and Garudji. He remembered Bharatji (son of King Rishabhdev) and made a wish to meet him in future.

Austerity at Pulhashram

Bharat had performed austerities here. The place is called Bharatkund. A little below this spot Brahma's son, Pulah, also undertook austerities. That is why the whole area is also known as Pulhashram. Nilkanth had decided to do austerities at Bharatkund. As it was the rainy season, there were incessant rains. In addition, there were blizzards. It was an extremely hazardous place to visit. Anyone going there would be doing so at his risk and responsibility. It was an open invitation to death.

It was this inhospitable spot that Nilkanth chose as his place for austerity to redeem souls. He would get up at 4.30 am, bathe in the Gandki and go for darshan of Muktinath. Then, wearing only a *kaupin* he would stand on one leg to perform austerities. He would keep his gaze fixed on the tip of his nose, and his hands upraised. His matted locks resembled a crown. There was a tulsi *mala* around his neck. The *tilak* and *chandlo* added nobility to his forehead. His body was emaciated because of his ceaseless travels and austerities. He would eat any fruit that fell to the ground. If fruit were not available, he would take water only. Sometimes he

would go even without food and water. He would recite mantras in praise of Surya Dev. Sometimes he would recite verses from the Sam Veda. Varni's rigorous austerities caused restlessness among the sages and gods alike. Dharmadev and Bhaktimata came in their divine form to protect their son.

This was the daily routine for Varni. He would not rest even at night. Varni was God himself. He was undertaking austerities for the salvation of humanity. He had nothing to gain from it for himself. He was steady in his attitude and was immersed in his *atma*. The surroundings did not affect him.

The rigours of Nilkanth's austerities was such that the mandir priest and those who came for darshan of Muktinath wondered whether it was Kartikeya Swami who had come to perform austerities! It was not clear whether such devotion had been undertaken previously and whether any mention is found in our scriptures and history. But as Nilkanth's objective was to do good to others, he was not concerned about other things or what others thought about him. He was immersed in his own self for the well-being of others. That way his austerities were nobility personified.

It was Nilkanth's intention to re-establish dharma which had gradually deteriorated since Sat-yug. The only way to do it was to promote austerity along with bhakti. His aim was to make people realise the futility of indulging in worldly pleasures and to set an example to others in renunciation.

The four months of Chaturmas were over. On the night of Thursday 14 November 1793 (Prabodhini Ekadashi of A.S. 1850) Nilkanth chanted the Gayatri mantra and pleased the sun-god. The next day the sun-god appeared before him.

When Varni saw the sun-god before him, his voice choked with emotion. The

sun-god was also surprised with the darshan of Nilkanth Varni. With a crown on his head, ornaments on his ears and yellow silk clothes, the sun-god looked resplendent. When he saw the emaciated body of Nilkanth before him, the sun-god was ashamed of his luxury.

Nilkanth praised him with folded hands. The sun-god smiled on hearing Varni's prayer. He said, "My Lord! It is because of you I am great. I have acquired my radiance by worshipping you. Even then in your human form what is that joy you are seeking from me?"

Varni said with folded hands, "Please protect me from passion, anger, greed, ego, attachment and sense-gratification, so that my absolute observance of *brahmacharya* remains unbroken and eternal. Please bless me with this. Whenever I remember you, grant me your darshan."

On hearing this, the sun-god was perplexed. He thought, "Nothing can trouble God whose abode is beyond Mul Prakruti, in whom Prakruti itself gets enveloped. How can even a trace of Prakruti influence him who is the supreme God?"

The sun-god at once said, "My Lord! You want to establish true religion based on absolute *brahmacharya* to enable countless to attain the state of God-realisation. You have all these qualities. Though you are the repository of all redemptory qualities, whatever you ask will come true." On hearing these words, Varni once again offered namaskar to the sun-god. The sun-god at once disappeared.

On Thursday, 14 November 1793 (A.S. 1850, Kartik *sud* 12), Nilkanth's austerities came to an end. Varni wished to repay the sun-god by establishing his *murti* (in mandirs) on earth.

Farewell to Muktinath

Nilkanth was happy that his two-and-a-half month austerity had concluded in a fruitful manner. He went for darshan of Muktinath. Now he had a measure of his aim in life – unalloyed bhakti. He departed from Muktinath determined to promote bhakti. He decided to take the same route by which he had come to Muktinath for the return journey. He came down to the valley to take the Kali Gandki route. An intensely cold wind was blowing. But Varni's body had become used to the vagaries of weather. Extreme cold or intense heat did not affect him.

On the return journey he took the same route, crossing Dhavalgiri and Kala Parvat. After leaving Muktinath he came to Butolpattan (Butval). This was the only route that would take him to the bank of the Gandki. As he took the route along the Gandki he did not have to again enter the cavern through which the mighty river flowed. The Gandki flows towards the south from the village of Ririvizhor. Varni left its banks and started walking eastwards.

Nepal is full of mountains, ravines, valleys and jungles. That was why Varni had to ascend mountains and descend into ravines and valleys. The jungles were so dense that not even a fraction of the sun's rays could pass through them. The young Brahmachari recited slokas from the Sam Veda or sang the *Gopikageet* or *Bhramargeet* of the Shrimad Bhagvat. Elephants, rhinoceroses, wild buffaloes and other animals ran hither and thither with fear at the roar of lions and tigers. In some corner the mongoose and the snake would be engaged in a deadly duel. Scorpions and other poisonous creatures would run away after coming into contact with Varni's feet. In this dense jungle, Varni walked straight ahead telling the beads of his rosary, singing verses from the Sam Veda or reciting *stotras,* unmindful of the surroundings and obstacles in his path. He had a rosary in one hand and a

gourd in the other. His aim was to redeem all, even elevate animals through his divine association.

Encounter with Mohandas

As Nilkanth was passing through the jungle he came across a sadhu. The sadhu was greatly surprised to see Nilkanth walking alone through the dense forest. Equally surprising was his age. He wondered as to why the youngster had left home to face the dangers of the forest. But on seeing him, the sadhu experienced bliss. The three *gunas* which whirl round in the mind, especially *rajas* and *tamas,* subsided. The sadhu realised that the young Brahmachari was endowed with divine qualities otherwise he would not be experiencing such bliss.

The sadhu joined his palms in salutation and greeted Varni, "Sadhuram, Namo Narayan." Nilkanth looked up and replied with folded hands, "Namo Narayan."

Then Nilkanth asked, "Sadhuram, who are you and why are you roaming in this dense forest where no man sets foot? What is your purpose?"

The sadhu found that there was compassion in Nilkanth's voice. The stranger said, "Brahmachariji, while passing through the Himalayan valley I have lost my way. But why are you travelling in this dangerous impenetrable forest all alone at this young age?"

Nilkanth replied, "I am roaming in this forest to show the way to people like you who have lost their way."

"Maharaj, then permit me to stay with you. My name is Mohandas. I am on my way to perform austerities in a Himalayan valley." Nilkanth recognised his sincerity and genuine feeling and said, "You are welcome to come with me."

Mohandas started walking in front of Varni. He thought by walking ahead he

could warn the Brahmachari of any dangers.

Nilkanth Varni perceived that Mohandas was pure at heart. But he noticed that the sadhu had one weakness – attraction towards beautiful objects. Someone had gifted Varni a gourd. Mohandas became infatuated with it, and worried that it may break. Along the way they came across a river. Mohandas started crossing the river stepping carefully on the moss-covered rocks. While Nilkanth was following behind, Mohandas alerted him, "Brahmachariji, be careful while crossing the river. You may slip and fall down, thus breaking the gourd." Nilkanth laughed at his excessive attachment for the trivial gourd. He crossed the river and deliberately broke the gourd by dashing it against a rock.

An agitated Mohandas exclaimed, "O Nilkanth! You have broken the beautiful gourd."

Nilkanth replied, "I broke the gourd because you were looking at the gourd and not at me. Instead of fixing your mind on God you were concentrating on such things. Tell me, how will you be redeemed from this world!"

Mohandas realised his ignorance. He knew that only God could detach a person from the bondage of worldly objects. He realised that Nilkanth was God. Mohandas prostrated before Nilkanth.

Day and night Nilkanth and Mohandas walked through the dense jungle. The foliage shut out the sun's rays, as if there was no sunrise and only permanent night. They lost count of time. After a few days, the forest became less dense. The sun's rays penetrated through the canopy of the forest. Then they came to a mountain chain. Nilkanth started climbing the mountain while Mohandas trailed behind him. Mohandas' desire to walk ahead of Varni weakened after he realised the dangers of the route. Nilkanth reached the top and Mohandas followed him.

There were tall trees on the mountain top. A lot of deep violet fruits as big as mangoes were lying on the ground. Nilkanth picked up one fruit and started eating it. Mohandas picked up one fruit to eat. Nilkanth exhorted, "Don't eat the fruit. It is poisonous. You will die if you eat it." So, he threw it away.

Meanwhile, four naked ascetics came there. When they saw Nilkanth eating the fruit, they plucked some fruits from the tree.

Nilkanth said to Mohandas, "Tell them not to eat the fruits."

Mohandas alerted the ascetics, "Don't eat those fruits. They are poisonous. You will die."

Then one of them said, "But the Brahmachari is eating the fruit."

Mohandas said, "He is a great person."

The ascetics said arrogantly, "We are also great!" And they thus started eating the fruit. Within no time all four of them dropped down dead.

One who does not have the quality of a sage, and pretends to be so, meets a sad end.

Mohandas Leaves Nilkanth

As soon as the two entered a mountainous territory, Nilkanth told Mohandas, "Now, you stay back here in a place of pilgrimage. Later you shall meet me in the west and be redeemed." Mohandas found a Shivalaya and stayed back.

A few years later, while on a pilgrimage to Dwarika, Mohandas arrived in Saurashtra. Here in Mangrol he met Ramanand Swami and Nilkanth Varni. He was overjoyed in meeting Varni. Later he was initiated as a *paramhansa* by Bhagwan Swaminarayan (Nilkanth Varni) and named as Vrajanand Swami.

Meeting King Mahadutt of Butolnagar

Varni trekked through the dense forests of Nepal, enduring the biting cold of winter. Rigorous austerities had reduced his body to the extent where his skin had become chapped. But Varni kept a steady pace brushing aside the extremities of weather. He would find a way through a herd of wild animals. Sometimes he hummed a tune and at other times chanted the beads. As he was going north, he came across several rivers. Some he swam across, others he floated along with the current, his tune mingling with the gurgling sound of the water.

In those days Nepal was divided into several principalities. In these principalities there were thousands of ascetics. Nilkanth merely looked at their groups and forged ahead. He did not feel like taking their assistance. Searching for holy land, Varni walked on untiringly. Wherever he was when night fell he would stay there. In due course, he came to a beautiful town and decided to stay there. There were nice gardens on the banks of the river. Varni came to a garden. He found a number of ascetics camping there. He asked them, "Whose permission should I seek if I want to stay here." The sadhus had a look at Nilkanth's face and replied, "Brahmachari, this garden belongs to the king. If you want to stay here you have to seek his permission." Varni then inquired "What is the name of this town? And who is the king?" The sadhus replied, "This place is called Butolnagar. The king's name is Mahadutt. He is very religious."

The King of Nepal, Prithvinarayan, had two sons – Pratap Shah and Bahadur Shah. Pratap ascended the throne and died when he was young. After his death his two-and-a-half-year-old son, Ranbahadur, came to the throne. As he was too young, his uncle, Bahadur Shah, was named the regent of the kingdom. He was a very competent administrator and desired to expand the kingdom. But he was

afraid of Mahadutt Sen. He married Mahadutt's daughter, Vidyalakshmi, and formed an alliance with him. With the father-in-law's assistance he won several regions upto Kathmandu between 1786 and 1790. He annexed the new regions with the Gorkha kingdom, which subsequently came to be known as 'The House of Gorkha'. Kathmandu became its capital.

Mahadutt was a pious ruler of Butolnagar. The sadhus praised the ruler's piety. Nilkanth was convinced of what they had told him about the king and his kingdom. He chose a spot under a tree. One of the sadhus said, "Brahmachari, come inside the bungalow. It has all the facilities." Varni said with folded hands, "I like it better here in the garden."

Varni's arrival in Butolnagar was due to the culmination of Mahadutt's good deeds. In his daily schedule the ruler came to the garden accompanied by his sister, Mayarani. They started bowing and touching the feet of the ascetics and came to where Nilkanth was sitting. The royal siblings were struck by his personality and stood rooted to the spot. The glow emanating from his face and emaciated body impressed them deeply. The hidden light of knowledge within their innerself was kindled. Nilkanth was no less impressed by their piety. "You seem to be new," Mahadutt asked with folded hands.

Varni joined his palms and replied, "I am always new to this world. I am different from this world."

The king did not understand this and said, "What I mean to say is that you were not here yesterday. Your emaciated body shows that you have performed immense austerities. The radiance on your face is very attractive. You are unlike the other ascetics."

Nilkanth replied with a smile, "O King, once you associate with me, you will be

able to recognise who is attached and who is detached from this world. A true ascetic is he who is attached to God and nothing else. I have become an ascetic to awaken God-consciousness in people."

Mayarani was wonderstruck on hearing Varni's words. She felt unhappy that at a tender age Varni had left his home. There were tears in her eyes. She saw how withered his body had become out of intense austerities. Her heart melted on thinking of these things. She asked, "Brahmachari! Why are you not staying with the others in the bungalow?"

Nilkanth replied, "One who has the refuge of God does not need the shelter of a bungalow."

On hearing this Mahadutt's inner eye of knowledge opened. He replied with joined palms, "Maharaj, I have set apart this bungalow exclusively for sadhus. Uptil now many have come and gone. I have served them with love and dedication. But still my worldly desires have not been eradicated till today. I am experiencing infinite bliss with your darshan today." Then he stood there for some time and requested, "Please stay in this bungalow. I shall consider it my good fortune. I shall feel blessed and redeemed if you do so."

In response to the genuine sentiments of the king, Nilkanth agreed to stay in the bungalow. Mahadutt held his hand as a sign of gratitude. Mayarani picked up Varni's meagre belongings as the royal brother and sister took him to the reserved room. The ascetics saw this and they turned green with envy. The king asked a servant to attend to Nilkanth. Then Mahadutt left. However, Mayarani stood rooted to the spot. She found it extremely difficult to take herself away from Varni's presence. Her brother had to shout for her several times before she left the spot.

Nilkanth would bathe in the river early in the morning and attend to his daily routine. Then he used to come to the garden and sit under a tree. In the afternoon, when food arrived from the royal kitchen, he would eat only fruits and distribute the rest to the ascetics. The king would always come and sit before Nilkanth and listen to his preachings.

Imparting Divine Knowledge

Nilkanth explained to the king, "*Atma* is separate from the gross, subtle and causal bodies. Unite one's *atma* with Brahma and worship Parabrahma. If you worship merely on the physical plane, there will be obstacles. If you follow my instructions, there will be no problems or obstacles."

Mahadutt had a doubt, "*Atma* and Brahma are one and the same thing, are they not?"

Nilkanth clarified, "*Atma* is formless. Brahma has a form. The *jiva-atma* is pervaded by *maya* whereas Brahma is above *maya*. *Atma* can pervade in one universe whereas Brahma exists in countless universes. God resides as a witness *(sakshi)* in the *atma* whereas in Brahma he is wholly manifested."

Mahadutt had never heard such knowledge before. What he had learnt uptil now was that *atma* itself is Paramatma. He felt Nilkanth's words were divine. He thought his knowledge was true and it could be acquired from an ancient rishi like himself. In a flash he realised that Varni was a divine person. He bowed at Nilkanth's feet and took leave.

The king's daughters used to come to the garden with their friends. While other ascetics would ogle at them, Varni always kept his eyes lowered or was engrossed in meditation. The princesses and their friends were greatly pleased by the behaviour of

Varni whereas they found the other ascetics' conduct repulsive. When the princesses and their friends told the King about this, the King's respect for Nilkanth grew more and at the same time he lost respect for the ascetics who were inclined towards sensual pleasures.

The king and his sister decided to lodge Nilkanth in their palace. They approached Varni with folded hands and requested him to stay with them. But he politely declined their request. Then Mayarani said, "At least come to the palace to have meals." As there was earnestness in her request, Varni could not refuse.

Nilkanth would go to the palace every day for meals. Mayarani herself would cook different dishes to feed the distinguished Varni. As the royal pair served Varni with diligence each day their minds and hearts were cleansed of all material desires and attachments. Soon they had have a glimpse of Varni's resplendent personality. They were convinced that the all-pervasive Paramatma (God) who resides within the *atma* was none other than Nilkanth. It was Nilkanth who taught the difference between *atma* and Paramatma to the king. Mahadutt understood and realised that Nilkanth was Paramatma himself.

Moksha Assured

Varni blessed the royal siblings with divine knowledge. They would no longer be enmeshed in the coil of life and death – a cycle that is the result of the causal body. With his mission at Butolnagar over Nilkanth decided to leave the place. He came to his quarters and began preparations to leave. He rolled up the deerskin, tied the Shaligram to his neck and picked up his gourd. The Brahmachari was about to leave the room to resume his journey when Mayarani suddenly made her appearance. Varni

was startled by her presence. She asked "Brahmachariji what are all these preparations for?"

Nilkanth did not reply. Mahadutt also came on the scene. He saw that Varni was preparing to leave. He joined his palms in respect and said in a voice choked with emotion, "Maharaj! We have been together for so long. You have enlightened us about your divine form and why are you suddenly leaving us? The princesses have taken vows inspired by you. How can we exist without you?"

Nilkanth merely listened but did not say anything. On the one hand he had a greater mission to accomplish, and on the other was the devotion of Mahadutt and Mayarani.

He replied after a while, "Oh king, I have to go. Many pure souls are anxiously waiting for me." But the king and his sister did not let him go. On their insistence he put back his meagre belongings. But in the dead of night he quietly slipped out. When his departure was discovered the next day, mounted soldiers were despatched in different directions to search for him. Nilkanth had travelled 15 miles when the soldiers caught up with him. They prayed to him to come back. Nilkanth returned.

Mayarani was afraid that Nilkanth would again attempt to go away. She told the king, "Brother, Nilkanth will not stay. He will again go. Let the borders be manned by soldiers. We don't want to let Nilkanth go." The king agreed with his sister and gave order to his soldiers. Nilkanth knew everything. But he did not want to weaken the bonds of friendship and devotion that bound the royal pair to him. That was why he agreed to stay back temporarily despite his pressing work.

The brother and sister looked after him with devotion. His mission was to ful-

fil the wishes of his devotees. The king and his sister became engrossed in his bhakti. Nilkanth saw that King Mahadutt remained detached despite dispensing his royal affairs. Even Mayarani rose beyond the web of *maya*. Varni thought, with his work accomplished, it was time for him to leave. He celebrated the Janmashtmi festival of 1795 (A.S. 1851). He had stayed there for five months.

Circuitous Route

One early morning, Nilkanth left the place. He crossed the boundary without any difficulty. Before sunrise he covered a lot of ground by taking the northward path. He felt that if he took the normal straight path then the king's horsemen would catch him. So he took a desolate route. He had no idea how many miles he had travelled. As the sun was rising Varni reached a beautiful river. He decided to perform his morning ablutions. Then he sat under a tree.

The northern route from Butolnagar towards Pokhra was covered by dense forests. But the route did not bother him. He kept on walking. On the way Nilkanth arrived at the town of Mataripu. Here, the king desired gold and was serving his guru who came out of his cave once a year. Nilkanth exposed the deceptive guru and dissolved the king's ignorance. Proceeding further through the forests, there was no possibility of any places of pilgrimage on the way. Being the all-knower Nilkanth knew that an expert yogi had awakened his *sushumna*. That was the reason why he was going in that direction. As Varni advanced, his footsteps cooled the earth baked by the sun's rays.

Proceeding slowly Nilkanth soon saw an ascetic sitting under a sprawling banyan tree. He was wearing a loincloth, a fraying upper cloth and a deer skin. His *sushumna* was awakened. He had a desire to see God in a human form on earth. He

had a rundown hut under the tree. He was about to recite the Gita and worship Krishna as Nilkanth approached. When the yogi saw the resplendent Brahmachari he felt as if the *murti* that was in his mind's eye was face-to-face before him. The yogi was overjoyed to see the young celibate. Varni was also drawn towards the yogi. The yogi stood up and started running towards Nilkanth. The two embraced each other. It was a meeting of God and his devotee! It appeared foreordained. The yogi was ecstatic because of his union with God. The historic meeting took place around October 1795.

Meets Gopal Yogi

When they unclasped each other there were tears of joy in their eyes. Gopal Yogi said, "Bhagwan! You kept me waiting for so long."

Varni smiled and said, "I have trudged through forests and mountains in search of a yogi like you. I met many on the way; some steeped in worldly pleasures and some proud and arrogant. But I met none like you, endowed with sterling qualities and a pure, unblemished heart."

Gopal Yogi was not interested in words of praise, he was engrossed in Varni's darshan.

Varni went on, "You have been fortunate to have found a true guru. Otherwise you could not have accomplished yoga of this calibre. I had travelled up to Nar-Narayan rishi's ashram. There I had seen consummate yogis engaged in meditation and with their minds concentrated on God's image, but I did not see a yogi like you. I had learnt concentration from them, and now I shall learn yoga from you."

Gopal Yogi was overjoyed. Varni wished to learn yoga and Gopal Yogi wished

for his presence.

Gopal Yogi first acquainted Varni with the yoga theory. Then he taught him Hath Yoga. Varni was a fast learner. He mastered different branches of yoga. Varni was endowed with intellect of a high order. Gopal Yogi was conversant with his versatility. They would sit together and eat fruits, tubers, etc.

Safety for Cattle

One day the cowherds, who resided nearby, approached Varni and said, "Maharaj! We are greatly troubled by tigers and panthers. They come and attack our cattle and carry them off. We are greatly saddened by this destruction of cows. Our cattle wealth gets reduced each day. In a week there are at least two or three raids on our cattle camp."

Nilkanth felt sorry on hearing this. He said, "Don't worry. Just as Bhima struck terror into the hearts of his enemies by blowing on his Paundra Shankh, I shall scare the wild beasts with my divine voice. Then they will not be able to come here."

Gopal Yogi told Varni, "You have to alleviate their sorrow. I do not have that power. Now that you have come please save their cattle."

Varni said to Gopal Yogi, "Bring your conch." He at once brought the conch to Nilkanth. Varni told the yogi to blow the conch-shell. The sound from the conch-shell spread all around. And from that day onwards no wild animal came anywhere near the cattle sheds. After Varni's feat, the cowherds had an easy time and were never afraid of wild animals.

The cowherds who were not able to recognise Nilkanth as the supreme God felt that Pushandev, the solar deity, of the Vedic times had come down in the

shape of Varni to save their cattle wealth. Out of gratitude they brought potfuls of milk for Varni and Gopal Yogi. But neither were interested in that which pampers the body.

An Apt Pupil

Varni learnt *ashtang-yoga* from Gopal Yogi. The latter considered it to be a service and means to offering devotion to Varni. In the finest tradition of the guru-*shishya* relationship, Varni treated Gopal Yogi as a guru. Thus Nilkanth did not allow his divine attributes to come in the way of the relationship between the teacher and the taught. In a short time he attained mastery as there was no better teacher than Gopal Yogi to explain to him the intricacies of yoga. Varni, too, proved himself to be an equally brilliant student. After learning *ashtang-yoga* Varni told Gopal Yogi, "Now I have the darshan of my *atma*."

Gopal Yogi smiled on hearing this. He felt that Nilkanth is present in everyone's *atma*. He is the support of Brahma, who is eternal, and still Varni says that he has the darshan of his *atma*. But to know what was in his mind Gopal Yogi asked in a most natural way, "Then you have completed your yoga course?"

Even after the realisation of *ashtang-yoga* there was something more to be attained. This, Nilkanth wished to tell Gopal Yogi. Varni said, "The fruit of *ashtang-yoga* is *nirvikalp* samadhi (absolute bliss). But if one's senses become inclined outwardly towards the sense pleasures then obstacles arise on the path of moksha. But if the *atma* unites with Brahma and becomes *brahmarup* then there is no obstruction. This is called the pure Gunatit state."

Gopal Yogi was listening to the exposition. This consummation of a Brahmic state is an ancient philosophy, but sounded new to the Yogi's ears. He thought that

atma-realisation was the last stage of yoga.

Gopal Yogi Departs

Thanks to Varni's discourse and grace Gopal Yogi attained a Brahmic state. He saw that the God inside his *atma* and Varni outside were one and the same. His mind became fixed in the *murti* of God. Gopal Yogi soon shed his mortal body as his task on earth was over. Before passing away he presented Varni with a (Panch Ratnano gutko*)

After performing the last rites of Gopal Yogi, Varni stayed there for a few days at the insistence of the cowherds. Then he travelled in the eastern direction. It is said that Nilkanth spent about a year with Gopal Yogi. Therefore it can be safely assumed that he may have left the place around November 1795 (Kartik in Samvat 1852).

Varni entered a dense forest. Nature was dressed in splendid green vegetation. The young Brahmachari was delighted by nature's bounty. It maintains its pristine purity in places untouched by human feet. After walking for some distance he came across a river. The surroundings were full of plants and trees bearing fruits and flowers. The aroma of the fragrance in the breeze with the birds singing made the place very alluring to Nilkanth. He was witnessing his creative power at its best and decided to stay there for some time.

Arrival in Uttar Kashi

After staying in the forest for some time Nilkanth started his journey again.

* Shriji Maharaj gave this *gutko* to Sadguru Muktanand Swami. Muktanand Swami in turn presented it to Raghuvirji Maharaj. Currently it is in Akshar Bhavan in Vartal mandir.

This time he came to Pokhra which is also called Uttar Kashi. The river Seti Ganga flows nearby. Varni took a dip in the river. After performing his ablutions Varni went to a Shiv mandir on the banks of the river. He was pleased to see a Sanskrit school in the town where students were busy studying. Varni thought while walking that knowledge removes ignorance and as such is a means to liberation. Spreading knowledge through the Sanskrit language would strengthen the foundation of Vedic culture. He conversed with the students whom he met on the way. Both the students and the pundits were greatly surprised at Nilkanth's interest in education and his knowledge at that tender age. Then he returned to the Shiv mandir. A pious pundit was drawn towards Nilkanth. He saw the image of Shiv in him. He prayed to Nilkanth. Varni blessed him with redemption. The pundit was very happy. The pundit was used to getting alms, donations or the consideration of the local ruler, but he had never got blessings which would redeem him. He was yearning for it. It was not in the power of any mortal to give it. He could get it only from either God or his Sadhu.

On the second day Varni left the Shiv mandir. He had revealed himself to perform the noble deed of redeeming souls as quickly as possible, keeping in mind the fleeting time. He was in a hurry. Whenever he came across a pure soul he would stay for some time, and whenever he encountered demonic powers he would destroy them and only then proceed further. His work at Pokhra was over so he proceeded towards the east. He sanctified the rivers Narayanganga and Bhuriganga on the way and came to Trishuliganga.

There is a lake at the peak of Shivpuri Mountain in Nepal and to its north lies a tall mountain. Three streams originate from the three peaks of this mountain. It is known as Trishuldhara. According to tradition it issued out of Shivji's

trident. One of the streams is called Trishuliganga. There are twenty-two big and small lakes on the mountain. Nilkanth bathed in the Trishuliganga and proceeded further.

Every pilgrim place has a legend attached to it. Once the legend is forgotten, the pilgrim place loses its importance. But it was Nilkanth's mission to visit the pilgrim places, however inaccessible they were, to revive the sacred status they enjoyed, thus keeping alive the ageless Indian culture and tradition and also to redeem the devotees visiting such places. He came across a group of ascetics on the way and joined them. Here, too, his divine personality radiated.

Stay in Kathmandu

After climbing mountains and passing through jungles, Nilkanth entered Kathmandu, the capital of Nepal, in the company of the ascetics. King Prithvinarayan Shah had made Kathmandu the capital of the Gorkha kingdom. His second son Bahadur Shah extended the kingdom by annexing the territories on the western side. Nilkanth's idea in visiting Kathmandu was to pray at the Pashupatinath mandir. The ascetics camped in a dharmashala, but Nilkanth went straightway for darshan of Pashupatinath mandir.

At that time (around 1796 CE), Prithvinarayan Shah's grandson Ranbahadur was the ruler. He was suffering from an incurable disease. He had entertained many ascetics, priests and Brahmins in his kingdom with the hope that they would cure his disease. But they failed with their charms and spells and were thus put in jail. So nobody was prepared to take the risk lest they land in jail. Soon, ascetics and Brahmins stopped coming to his kingdom. When the leader of the ascetics came to know of this, he told Nilkanth, "Let us not enter

this place."

Varni had a hearty laugh and said, "An ascetic should never be afraid. Either a pleasure-seeker may fear someone or something or a sick man may be afraid of something. But a man who has no illness, that is, one in whom there are no enemies like lust and anger, why should he be afraid? We must go to the king."

The ascetics were very nervous, but they had full faith in Nilkanth's powers. The king came to know at once that some ascetics had arrived in the city. He issued orders that they should be looked after well. Then he sent for the leader. The chief ascetic went to court with Nilkanth. The king received them with due honours.

The king narrated his tale of woes, "I am suffering from an incurable disease. Sadhus who have a divine spark in them come here. I honour them duly and seek a cure for my disease. But no one has been able to cure my affliction." While saying this the king began to gasp for breath. After a pause he said, "Having realised that they are all fake sadhus I put them into jail." Helplessness appeared clearly on the king's face, but there were also flashes of anger.

Result of Karma

Nilkanth felt sorry for the king. Sorry not for his incurable disease but for his unreasonable nature. He spoke to him slowly, "Oh king! Your karmas from previous births are such that even those who know mantras or are skilled in magic cannot cure your disease. You cannot get over what God has ordained. The only thing you can do is to treat it as your karma. Pray to God and bear the pain of suffering with patience. With this type of whimsical attitude your suffering will not subside, in fact you are enmeshing yourself in the coils of new

karma."

The king turned soft after listening to Varni. He appealed to Nilkanth with folded hands, "Brahmachari! Provide me with some solution to relieve me of my pain. I have overlooked the worship of God. I am entangled in the web of karma. Because of your pure conduct I am convinced in my heart that you will mitigate my suffering."

Nilkanth desired to redeem the king. He also wished to get the innocent sadhus freed. The time for the fruits of the monarch's good deeds had ripened. That was why Varni had come to him. Nilkanth asked for some water. He took water in his palms and told the king, "This water has not been invested with any magical powers. It has been sanctified by God. Drink it. God will relieve you of your pain."

The king drank the sanctified water with faith. Varni willed that the king be cured of his incurable disease. The holy water began to act at once. The king began to feel better instantly. He felt relieved of his chronic stomachache. The king saluted Varni and said, "You have come here to help me and to grant me new life. I can never repay you for this favour. Still, I want to be of some service to you. Please ask me whatever you wish."

Nilkanth smiled and said, "If you give me any article of this world, it will be of no use to me. If you feel I have done you a good turn and feel happy about it, then release the sadhus whom you have imprisoned. It is all I ask."

The king was greatly surprised at Nilkanth's disinterest in worldly things. He thought God surely resides in sadhus, but one requires the vision to recognise him. The king realised that Varni was God. He said, "Okay, I hereby order the release of all the sadhus." Varni blessed the monarch and went to the dharmashala where he

was staying. Varni stayed there for a month. He would take alms from the King's almshouse.

Then he quietly left Kathmandu. He wanted to search for humane behaviour. He liked those inclined towards God. He wanted to mould yogis untouched by worldly desires and ties. He was constantly in search of such sadhus. He wished to create an atmosphere for such sadhus.

Varni left Nepal, proceeded north and entered Tibet. There he saw Buddhist monasteries, cast a glance at China and then returned to Nepal.

While going to the holy place of Adivarah, Nilkanth had cursed the servants of the local ruler of Bansi as they had needlessly killed two birds, "Let this place be burnt." The town caught fire at once. Nilkanth felt sorry and cursed his speech to become ineffective.

He walked eastwards. After ten days of rigorous travel, climbing mountains and rough terrains he came to the holy place of Adivarah, on the banks of the river Kosi, which is also called Varahkshetra. It is situated on the peak of Dhavalgiri mountain and is also known as Kokamukh. It has a four-armed *murti* of Bhagwan Varah. Near the mandir the Thobra river, whose waters are used in worship flows. The river is also called Koka. A mela is held on Kartik Purnima which lasts for three days.

The residents of Adivarah were greatly impressed by Varni's renunciation at such a tender age. Even though his body was emaciated his looks were charming. Everybody saw the divine personality in Nilkanth.

Soon, hordes of people flocked for Varni's darshan. He was happy in their midst as they were pure souls. He preached to them not to fall into the trap of hypocrites and to follow true sadhus to liberate themselves from the cycle of

births and deaths. There was great force in his words. His serene countenance attracted them most. They found in him a glow which was not of this world. He stayed there for three days and quietly left the place. He proceeded towards East Bengal (present-day Bangladesh).

6. In East Bengal

1796-1797

King Siddhavallabh of Sirpur

The eastern part of Bengal was in a state of turmoil at that time. Its ailing economy was due to ongoing natural calamities in the form of floods and droughts. Unscrupulous ascetics had a field day. They held the hapless population to ransom. They roamed around in groups of thousands, looting people and devastating the land. They were armed to the teeth. The conduct of these fake sadhus was such that they were hated because of their unruly behaviour and ill manners. They did not even spare Sirpur. A large group was present there. King Siddhavallabh was a generous and pious monarch. His wife was equally devoted to God. She participated in all the good deeds of her husband.

The conduct of the fake ascetics left much to be desired. The fake ascetics residing in Sirpur were godmen only in name. They were addicted to all sorts of vices. Some were naked and some practised black magic. They worshipped several minor, inferior and malevolent powers. Not only this, they did not even hesitate in kidnapping boys to increase their numbers. They had no families or settled existence. They had come down from China, Tibet and Kabul in swarms.

Siddhavallabh always welcomed them with offerings and sumptuous feasts. He would daily go for their darshan considering them to be sadhus. The fake sadhus had found his hospitality pleasing and they stayed there for longer periods.

The king was a good man who was very devoted to God. He had been serving the fake sadhus, but he did not have inner peace. The moment he saw Nilkanth he experienced bliss and his agitated mind was at once calmed. He was immediately attracted by the young Brahmachari's personality. The king found in Varni's emaciated body the unmistakable signs of his rigorous austerities. The king entertained the vagrant ascetics irrespective of their wayward, wicked ways by supplying them with good food. But nothing came of it. In Nilkanth the king at once saw the light of divinity and detachment from worldly things. Unlike the ascetics, he appeared to be of a peaceful disposition who was not eager to frighten people with black art. He had come here because of the king's past good deeds and to redeem him. The king received Varni with due honours.

Plea to Varni

The king learnt that Varni would not stay at any place for long unless there were compelling reasons. So he came to Varni and appealed to him, "Varni! Please stay here. That is my humble request." The young Brahmachari agreed to the king's request. Nilkanth knew the extent of havoc the fake ascetics had wrought in the kingdom through their misconduct. He resolved to put an end to that. When the king came to know that Varni was alone he appointed a celibate sadhu called Gopaldas, who was staying with him, to attend on him. Nilkanth had a liking for those who observed strict celibacy. And he would accept the services of such celibates only. Gopaldas attended to Nilkanth with reverence and devotion.

The ascetics were very proud of their powers which they got by propitiating minor deities. The people were terribly afraid of those who were used to getting things done by the power of their evil chants. The ascetics were respected not because of their saintly conduct but because of the destructive forces at their command. Nilkanth, on the other hand, stressed on right conduct in his discourses. He preached, "A sadhu is one who has no enemies, is kind and forgiving, who is a true celibate. A sadhu should engage his *atma* in the joy of devotion to God and exhort others to do the same. They should use their powers for helping others attain moksha and not worldly pleasures."

Varni used to talk constantly of religion, knowledge and renunciation and his preaching had an effect on their minds. Even then, gullible people would run after fake sadhus thinking that the sadhus would fulfil their worldly desires by magical powers. It was a difficult task to free them from worldly desires but Varni possessed the power to do so.

Though it was not the rainy season there were light showers. The fake ascetics saw the king coming towards them. So, as if to show their powers, they sat in a meditative posture in the rain. Considering it to be their austerity the king became happy.

Then Nilkanth willed it to rain more heavily. There was a downpour accompanied by a dust-storm. The ascetics ran helter skelter in search of shelter. Some ran into a house. Others found a tree or a shed to protect themselves against the torrential rain. At that time Nilkanth remained seated in the open, meditating. The dust that was raised by the gusty winds had stuck to Varni's wet body and covered it completely. He became invisible. The ascetics were watching the scene from a distance, feeling happy at what they thought was Varni's discomfiture.

Shelter from Rain

The rain stopped and the dust storm also subsided. The king arrived on the scene to see what had happened to Nilkanth and the ascetics. He found the fake sadhus emerging one after the other from their places of shelter. But he did not see Nilkanth or Gopaldas. The king felt sorry for Nilkanth. Then there was another heavy downpour by Nilkanth's wish. The king, royal servants and the ascetics ran into the bungalow for shelter. The fresh downpour washed off the dust that had concealed Nilkanth. When Nilkanth became visible, the king felt elated.

King Siddhavallabh was very happy as Varni remained undisturbed despite the rain and storm. He at once went to Varni. But he was in deep meditation and could not be roused. Nilkanth was cleansed with fresh water and the king served him personally. Then his body was warmed with a coal fire. The ascetics became intensely jealous at the king's ministration of Nilkanth. They were under the impression that the downpour and the dust storm had finished off Nilkanth. But he was hale and hearty. Nilkanth's state of samadhi convinced the king of his divine powers.

Slowly Varni came out of his samadhi. He noticed the king and his attendants bustling around him. "What is all this? Where are the sadhus? Have you inquired as to how they are?" Nilkanth continued, "I had performed austerities in the Himalayas. At Pulhashram I withstood torrential rains. So my body can withstand anything. It is not shocked by any physical discomfort. First take care of the ascetics, they may need some help. Please go to them."

The king's attendants said, "They are all safe. They exposed their powers by taking shelter under trees or in houses when the downpour started!"

Nilkanth smiled on hearing this. The fake ascetics' hypocrisy had now become evident. King Siddhavallabh knew the difference between fake and real sadhus. His respect for Nilkanth grew on seeing Nilkanth's concern for even these fake sadhus. Deep in his heart he developed more and more love for Nilkanth. As a result his base nature dissolved. His soul became pure. In Nilkanth he saw Bhagwan Narayan. What was hitherto Siddhavallabh's admiration for Varni turned into pure bhakti.

The fake sadhus could not stomach the king's attachment and love for the young Brahmachari. They resolved not to give up easily and thus planned to destroy Varni with the array of evil practices at their command. They tried their tricks on the young Brahmachari by hurling some spells at him. But the spells had no effect on him. This incensed them further.

So, they chose Gopaldas, the sadhu attending to Nilkanth, as their victim. They hurled some grains at him after investing them with some evil power. The faithful servant of Varni fainted in no time. When the king learnt about this he was greatly worried. He sent for the ascetics and requested them, "You have used your black magic powers. Only you can now revive him from the power of your magic. Make him all right."

The fake ascetics saw their chance to belittle Nilkanth. They told the king, "Go and ask young Varni whom you worship. If he has powers let him use them to make Gopaldas all right. Is he not Nilkanth Varni's servant? So, ask him to revive him and restore him to normal health."

By now Siddhavallabh was convinced that Gopal's fit had been caused by the black magic of the ascetics. The king realised that they were jealous of Nilkanth. Their motive was to embarrass Nilkanth and prove him to be wrong. Siddhavallabh

felt there was no point in arguing with them. He had one thought uppermost in his mind. He wanted Gopaldas to get well. So the monarch immediately approached Varni, who was meditating, and said, "Oh Lord! These ascetics have used their spells and magic on Gopaldas and made him unconscious. Only you can revive him." Varni at once came to where Gopaldas was lying unconscious. The situation appeared serious to Varni.

Nilkanth thought there was very little to commend the likes of these false sadhus. Though their attire was that of sadhus, they utterly lacked saintly virtues. They practised black magic on anybody they disliked. They pretended to be *brahmacharis* but they were steeped in sensuousness. They indulged in carnal pleasures in a disgraceful manner. These fake ascetics infested the whole of the eastern belt of the country besides other areas. As society equated godmen with such wicked creatures, revulsion was growing against such sadhus, and people were becoming atheists. Such fake ascetics were responsible for this trend.

Gopaldas Revived

Nilkanth came to Gopaldas and chanted the Krishna mantra in his ear. Within a short time he was freed of the evil effects of the magic spell. He opened his eyes and saw Nilkanth before him. He at once raised his hands in *pranam*. Varni lifted him slowly and ran his hand over his body. Nilkanth's power of austerity and *brahmacharya* were such that by merely moving his hand over Gopal's body he nullified the ascetics' black art.

The ascetics were greatly surprised. They saw before their very eyes the utter futility of black magic. Some of them came to Varni. Thinking that they might seek refuge in Nilkanth, the rest of the ascetics cast their evil spells on them. In

retaliation the former group also cast their spell on them. Thus they started uttering their charms and spells against one another. Some of them fainted and began foaming at the mouth. Some of them started vomiting blood.

One may not be ready to believe in the power of mantras. But if anybody once sees it, he will fall prey to such evil power. Only a person with a steady mind will not be taken in.

Varni knew that souls tend towards unrighteousness. And these fake sadhus with their black magic held people to ransom. He wished to put them on the right path. He wished them to spread true dharma and bhakti. Magic spells have no effect against the chanting of God's name. Nilkanth wished to demonstrate this. So, he came to where the ascetics had fallen unconscious. He bent down and uttered the Krishna mantra. One by one they woke up as if nothing had happened. Before his powers, the hocus-pocus of the ascetics was overshadowed. Not only were they unable to harm Varni or his attendant, it was Nilkanth who came to the rescue of the rival ascetic factions when they used spells and chants against one another. There was irony in the entire episode.

The fake ascetics fell at Varni's feet. He told them, "You have renounced the world to offer devotion to God and be blessed with moksha. Instead you have abandoned your goal and through evil ways you are harassing people. This has resulted in your own downfall. Give up these wicked ways, become righteous and worship God. Your noble conduct will turn people towards God. If you are wicked, people will become atheists."

These words had a tremendous impact on their minds and hearts. They clearly understood the reason for their falling from God's grace. Thus, a group of ascetics from Bengal decided to give up their immoral ways to walk the path of right-

eousness.

Siddhavallabh had by now realised the glory of Varni's personality. He had witnessed the peak of spiritual virtues in Nilkanth. Whether he was God himself or he had all the powers of God, the king was confused in deciding. He placed a pile of money, elegant clothes and exquisite ornaments before Varni. Nilkanth smiled at it and said, "Never offer such gifts to a sadhu. They pollute the spirit of renunciation. If ever you want to gift something, surrender your mind. A true sadhu will cleanse your mind of all worldly desires and bless you with God. This is the dharma or duty of a sadhu."

The king had never before met a sadhu who talked like this. He had seen licentious ascetics in Bengal who picked up money with their spearpoint, intoxicated them with liquor and bhang and used torrents of foul language. On experiencing the pious ways of Nilkanth he was eager to retain him in his kingdom so that the troublesome sadhus could be transformed. There was a great deal of ignorance among the people who were given to superstition. They were seized by religious frenzy, yet they were timid. The fake sadhus took advantage of this and thus grew in strength.

The king had become absorbed in thoughts about Varni. When Varni awakened him, there were tears in his eyes. He told the king, "It is already late. Now you go back to your palace."

The king left with Nilkanth's image imprinted in his heart. Nilkanth's discourse had opened the ruler's inner eye. The hunger for communion with Varni grew with each passing hour. He started going to Varni every day. The young Brahmachari found him to be a spiritually inclined soul. That is the reason why he came to Bengal. While doing this, Nilkanth also rooted out ignorance and *adharma.*

The king realised the supremacy of the path of bhakti, which stresses that total surrender can be achieved through bhakti for God. He understood the futility of tantrism which placed emphasis on black magic. Nilkanth Varni had worked a miracle on the king.

Insatiable Greed

At that time a learned Brahmin from Telangan (Andhra Pradesh) came to Sirpur with his wife and son. King Siddhavallabh was greatly impressed with the Brahmin's scholarship and gave him gifts in abundance. But the money, grains and clothes he gave did not satisfy his greed. The king gifted him an elephant and Kalpurush. According to the Hindu shastras a *mandap* is constructed and a golden *murti* of Kalpurush is installed. Then Kalpurush is invoked by reciting mantras. This Purush cuts both ways. On the positive side he can cure diseases. On the negative side he can harm and virtually ruin the recipient if the latter is unworthy. This was the case with the pundit from Telangan. The pundit gladly accepted the elephant. His inner self got polluted with *rajogun* and *tamogun*. He lost his intellectual and moral standing. He lost the eligibility to bear the gift of Kalpurush. On accepting it his entire body turned black. His wife was greatly shocked by the change in his complexion. The king and his courtiers were amazed. The change in his personality was reflected in the Brahmin's voice and eyes. There was arrogance in his eyes and harshness in his voice. He became an object of ridicule to one and all.

Keeping in mind the changed circumstances the king bade him a courteous farewell. The scholar got on to the elephant and paraded himself through the streets of the capital city. The onlookers laughed at the spectacle. The poor wife

and son of the Brahmin had to walk beside the elephant. When he saw his dark complexion the Brahmin became restless and distressed. He saw Nilkanth at a distance. He stopped the elephant, got down and rushed to Varni.

The all-knowing Brahmachari pitied the Brahmin when he caught hold of his feet. He said, "Oh Brahmin! It is true that Brahmins are entitled to receive gifts. It is equally true that the king had to pay for a Brahmin's knowledge. In your case greed has polluted your character. Without realising spiritual knowledge you accepted Kalpurush as a gift. Because of that every cell in your body has changed." The Brahmin started crying. He said, "Maharaj, what you say is true. Because of my greed my virtues of a Brahmin have dimmed. My knowledge too has declined. Please take pity on me and bless me."

It is the duty of God and sadhus to help those who seek refuge in them. Nilkanth cast a benign glance at the distressed Brahmin. The glance acted like an elixir. The Brahmin's inner self became purified and he regained his original fair complexion.

* * *

The king's affection for Nilkanth increased with each succeeding day. The discourses that he delivered made him introspect. Even without yoga Siddhavallabh was able to enjoy the bliss of samadhi, thanks to the young Brahmachari. After Varni mitigated the Brahmin's sorrow the monarch's affection for Varni turned into bhakti. Varni now wanted to leave the place. At the same time he had to reveal his true self to the king. Because of this wish, the king was always by the side of Nilkanth.

As he had intense affection and reverence, one day while looking at him

Siddhavallabh had a vision of Varni in all his resplendent glory. The king's grosser qualities merged in the sublime and he experienced samadhi. He saw Varni in his teenage form, sitting on a throne in a sea of divine light. He had by his side Aksharbrahma and *akshar muktas*. The king saw the glow occupying every inch of space. He did not see the earth or universe. The divine space covered everything everywhere. He saw all the avatars in the supreme God – Nilkanth.

Krishna had bestowed his grace on Arjun and showed him his cosmic form. But even a mighty archer like Arjun was afraid of it. This was because Arjun's mind had not transcended the gross worlds. In this case the king's *atma*, by the grace of Nilkanth, transcended the gross worlds and became engaged with Purushottam Narayan's self and therefore Siddhavallabh could see Narayan. He could have darshan of Akshardham and the Master.

King's Guest

Varni conferred the favour of staying with the king because of the latter's intense devotion to him. But how long was he going to stay there? He had urgent work to do. So one day he told the king that he had to leave the place. The king felt sad at the imminent departure of Varni. The monarch was told, "My work here is over. I have to go. If you keep my image in your heart I shall always be near you."

All the sadhus wanted to go with Nilkanth. When the residents of Sirpur came to know of Varni's plans, they brought something or the other as a parting gift. Even the king's attendants brought gifts. And finally there was an abundance of gifts from the royal court. They were all piled up before Nilkanth. As the king and the people insisted out of devotion, Varni accepted a few gifts. Then he took leave of

them. The king and his subjects went some distance to see Varni off. They turned back at the young Brahmachari's request. He then celebrated the Annakutotsav of 1797 (Ashadhi Samvat 1853) and Kartik Punam with the sadhus and then left the place.

It was Nilkanth's habit to go alone. But he allowed the sadhus to come with him as he wanted to sow seeds of true saintliness in them. The thick forest through which Varni was passing was inhabited by cannibals. No man would ever pass through the forest. If however any man accidentally passed through the forest then the cannibals would tear him apart with their claw-like fingers and eat him up. The sadhus accompanying Nilkanth got a few glimpses of their presence, but they were unafraid as Nilkanth was with them.

After many days Varni and the sadhus came to Parshuramkund. It is situated in a valley on the north eastern boundary of the Himalayas. Varni came there with the sadhus. He and all the sadhus bathed in the sacred *kund*.

Nilkanth proceeded towards the east and came to the Kamakshi Devi mandir near the village of Amnagav in Assam. The mandir is situated on a mountain. Nilkanth and his companion sadhus were camping in a garden on the bank of the river Brahmaputra. King Vishvasinh and Shivsinh of Kuchbihar had built the mandir. According to the Devibhagvat this is the most sacred place among all places of Kamakshi Devi.

Varni got plenty of provisions here, but he took only what he needed. The place was haunted by naked ascetics who had blood red marks on their forehead and behaved in a riotous manner. They chanted the name 'Jai Ambe', 'Jai Bhavani' and 'Jai Kali'. They brandished spears in their hands and let out loud shouts to scare people. These sadhus were fond of meat and intoxicating drinks. It was evi-

dent from their stinking breath. Their bloodshot eyes were fearful to look at. Those who came in contact with them once were never to be found again. Even the mere sight of these ascetics was horrifying. The gullible people had fallen prey to their tricks. They had lost the sensibility to find out or to understand the truth. Out of fear and superstition they followed them like dumb animals.

Nilkanth Varni felt sorry for the gullible people entangled in superstition and blind beliefs. He had come to Kamakshi mandir only to show them the right path of liberation. Before the divine powers of God, his refuge and true *satsang,* these ascetics were powerless. Superstition would wane and the chains of blind beliefs would snap.

Nilkanth wanted to tell people about this. His resolve was very firm. Those who came to worship Kamakshi Devi saw Varni from a distance and were greatly attracted to his personality. Slowly a large crowd of devotees gathered around the young Brahmachari. A young lad's divine power had wrought this miracle. So many of these people, half-starved, semi-naked or clad in torn rags had been exploited by the wicked ascetics. They became poor because of the demands of the arrogant and greedy ascetics who were constantly pestering them for grains, clothes and money. Nilkanth pitied the people. Gradually all these people gathered around him.

Encounter with Pibek

The fake ascetics were witnessing a strange spectacle. The devotees were flocking to the young Brahmachari who asked them to follow the right path by giving up superstitions and false beliefs. He was asking sadhus to behave like sadhus and not exploit people by leading them down the false path. The fake sadhus

were really jittery as they felt Varni would expose them before the public. The large crowds that were milling around him were a sure sign of his growing popularity. The ascetics burned with rage because people, instead of coming to them, were going to the young yogi. But what could they do? They were dreadfully outnumbered. But these ascetics would not give in so easily. It was a matter of bread and butter for them. They fattened on the gullibility and superstitions of the people. The fake ascetics saw the calm look on Nilkanth's face. They quietly left the place to approach Pibek, the notorious *tantric* of the area. He was a master of black magic who was ever ready with his spells and charms. When the ascetics met Pibek, they egged him to take on Nilkanth whose preaching was harming their common interests. He agreed, and marched towards Nilkanth with his motley group of disciples.

Formerly, Pibek was a Brahmin who practised the tenets of the Vaishnav Sampraday. He was a pious devotee, but things changed when he came under the influence of the corrupt Kaul, Shakta and Vammargis. Loose living was a hallmark of such people. When Pibek studied the shastras of the Kaul philosophy it brought his carnal desires to the fore. He squandered his integrity by indulging in alcoholism, meat eating and adultery. He was proud of his skills in black magic. With a garland of skulls around his neck, a *trishul* in his hand, fearful markings on his forehead, he looked every inch the formidable black magician that he claimed to be. Whichever village Pibek entered he left behind a trail of desolation. Everybody had to bow to his demands if he valued his life. He thought he was invincible.

After having the darshan of Kamakshi Devi in the mandir, Nilkanth came back to the garden. He sat underneath a tree and started preaching to the sadhus

who had come along with him. At that time Pibek came with his male and female disciples.

When Nilkanth saw the hideous features and dress of Pibek, he despised him. His companions were no less despicable. The women were scantily clad, they were dancing in an indecent fashion, drinking and making a public nuisance of themselves. They were misusing the sacred 'Om' and uttering some mantras. On seeing Pibek, the sadhus who were with Nilkanth became mortally afraid.

When Pibek saw Nilkanth, he exploded with wild laughter. He felt he would easily defeat the lean 16-year-old boy. Nilkanth told the sadhus who were sitting round him in a calm voice, "Do not be frightened at all. Listen to me. Don't cast even a glance at him." On seeing Nilkanth behaving in such a calm fashion, Pibek became all the more agitated and angry. He let out his loud and uncontrollable laughter once again. It resembled the sound of thunder. The sadhus were petrified. They got up and tried to leave the place. When Varni saw this he told them, "Why are you all trying to leave? What can a hot-tempered fellow who worships malevolent deities do to you? Why are you afraid of such a person? Nobody can kill you unless it is ordained by the supreme God."

The young Brahmachari's utterly fearless attitude and calm exterior came as a great surprise to Pibek. He took this to be a mockery of his powers. "Oh lad, you are a young and inexperienced fellow. You have not seen my powers." Nilkanth smiled on hearing this. The crowd warned him, "Varni, this Pibek is an expert in black magic. He will reduce you to ashes." Nilkanth replied, "Except God no one can order death. Let him show his miracles." Pibek took a handful of grains, uttered some spells and hurled them at a tree. The tree which was green dried up instantly. Its leaves shrivelled up and fell on the ground. Smoke started coming out of the

burnt tree. The sadhus who were with Varni were greatly frightened by this. They again prepared to leave. Nilkanth took pity on them. He asked them, "Why are you afraid of him? Let him try his magic first on me. If he succeeds, you can leave immediately." On listening to these words Pibek was enraged. He hurled a few grains at Varni. But to everyone's surprise nothing happened to him. Pibek's anger knew no bounds. He told the young Brahmachari, "Your time has come." Nilkanth said with a soft smile, "Do whatever you want to do without talking too much. Your demons, Kalbhairav and Batukvir, cannot do anything to me." Pibek was greatly surprised on hearing this. He prayed to the demon Kalbhairav who appeared at once. But he could not go anywhere near Varni. Batukvir, another more fearful demon, was invoked next and requested to kill Nilkanth but he stood still. Surprisingly he began attacking Pibek. He floored him and started beating him. Blood started to ooze out of Pibek's mouth.

Pibek's Powers Fail

Things were turning against Pibek. He became livid with rage as a result of the challenge to his powers. Despite his aching body, he got up and prayed to Hanumanji. Hanumanji appeared at once. He went to Nilkanth and bowed to him. Then he came to Pibek and launched a merciless attack on him. He first kicked him with his foot and then pounded his head with his powerful fists. Blood flowed in a steady stream from Pibek's mouth and his pulse rate fell. He became unconscious and crashed to the ground.

Pibek's followers saw the pitiable condition in which their master had landed himself as a result of his arrogance and overweening pride. They came to Nilkanth and prayed to him for mercy. Nilkanth took pity on Pibek. He went to Pibek who

was lying on the ground and uttered the name of God in his ear. The *tantric* regained consciousness in a short time. He knew that it was because of Nilkanth's grace that he was alive. He instantly fell at Nilkanth's feet.

That night Pibek's mind started entertaining evil thoughts. His badly bruised ego instigated him to take revenge. He prayed to Kalbhairav. The latter appeared before Pibek, who told him, "My powers are not working against Nilkanth. You have to save my reputation." Kalbhairav started laughing on hearing this and said, "Nilkanth is God himself. You want to kill him with my help? I am a menial. Your welfare lies in total surrender to Varni. Fall at his feet. Therein lies your well-being. If you seek refuge in him you will be able to get out of this unfortunate cycle of births and deaths."

On hearing Kalbhairav's advice, Pibek began to think in a more reasonable manner. He gave up the thought of revenge. He got up early next morning, had a bath, put on a pair of white clothes and presented himself before Varni. He prostrated before Nilkanth and caught hold of his feet. The repentant Pibek began shedding tears. The tears were washing Nilkanth's feet. Then he took the dust of Varni's feet and put it on his head.

Nilkanth said, "Pibek, a truly realised sadhu does not frighten others. He who has set out in search of God is not afraid of anything. My divine powers have reduced your mantra *shakti* to ashes." Pibek's followers were aghast at the change. What had happened to their master who knew everything that was to be known in tantrism and whom they thought was invincible? Here he was eating out of Nilkanth's hand like a pet bird. He was not looking at anyone in the eyes. He averted his gaze and his eyes were downcast. His profound knowledge of black magic and the powers it conferred were of no avail before the 16-year-old

Brahmachari. Pibek once again touched Nilkanth's feet. His grace was such that all the evil that was bottled up in Pibek started coming out. His mind became clear and all the dross was washed out. He remembered his previous existence when he was a pious Vaishnav Brahmin. How could he be compared with the present-day demonic Pibek! His inner eye opened. Varni appeared to him like Bhagwan Vishnu.

Pibek's short contact with Nilkanth cleansed the *tantric's* heart. His personality had undergone a striking change. Pibek had an intense desire to meet God before he became wayward. That was why Nilkanth came all the way to the Kamakshi mandir.

Varni blessed and gave darshan to all those who expressed their desire to follow him. He raised Pibek and ran his hand over his head and said, "Get your head clean-shaven, from now onwards wear the Vaishnav *tilak*, read the Bhagvad Gita regularly, and worship Vishnu. Do not wear weird clothes that frighten others, wear simple clothes. Be simple in your appearance." Pibek still could not look at Nilkanth. He was looking at the ground. But, despite this, Varni's image was imprinted in his mind. He was standing and listening to what Varni was saying.

Then Nilkanth shook Pibek by his shoulder and said, "Now you may go. Just as you have forgotten the knowledge of your previous birth through ignorance, likewise you should forget the knowledge of the black arts through the divine revelation you have just experienced. God will redeem you."

Varni got up. Pibek once again saluted him. He took the dust from under Varni's feet and smeared it all over his body. Varni blessed him with redemption. This resulted in good thoughts gaining an upper hand in Pibek's mind. Varni had ordered him to lead the life of a Vaishnav.

Varni had to redeem many more souls. He was in a hurry. He could not be stopped. If people carried on their conduct as per his wishes they would have the benefit of his divine presence.

Varni stayed there for a month and left. The group of sadhus who were with him also left. Varni desired to travel alone. A difficult route lay ahead. To the south he had to traverse the mountainous terrain of Assam covered with thick jungles. He had made up his mind to go ahead, irrespective of the countless difficulties he would have to encounter on the way. He was not concerned about physical comforts. He had only one aim: to redeem the just and to convert or punish the wicked.

Sages of Navlakha Mountain

Varni left Kamakshi and once again travelled southwards. His objective was Navlakha mountains in the Chatgau district. It is thought to be a mountain chain (though not found in any atlas) near Shillong. It is said that only those with divine grace and vision could go there. It was called Navlakha because nine lakh great sages were performing austerities.

It was difficult to reach Navlakha mountains. The way was covered with dense forests. There was no pathway as it was virgin territory. But for ages yogis numbering nine lakhs had been expectantly waiting for the supreme God. The entry point to the difficult jungle track was guarded by the king's men. They tried to bar Nilkanth's way. They said, "The place is full of ferocious beasts. The whole area is such that no man can go there. That is why our king has set up this sentry post here." Varni stopped and said slowly, "Wild animals cannot do anything to me. I am in a hurry. Please let me go." The sentries had a look at Nilkanth. His body was emaciated through intense austerities. Determination was writ large on his face.

There was lustre in his eyes. The sentries had barred Varni's entry as part of their duty. But they were convinced that he was no ordinary boy. They folded their hands in reverence to him and waved him forward. Nilkanth advanced with a smile on his lips.

Nilkanth entered the forest in the morning. He crossed streams, encountered tigers and cheetahs, came across elephant herds, and several other wild beasts. He reached the mountain towards evening. It was the night of 13 January 1797 (A.S. 1853 Poshi Punam day). While climbing the mountain Varni saw many great sages with fires burning in front of them in *yagna kunds*. It was a unique sight. He called some of them as he passed by but they did not respond. Varni reached the mountain top. There were so many great sages sitting in yogic postures, meditating. This amazing sight was beyond man's intelligence. Nilkanth himself sat in a yogic posture and began to meditate. While meditating he divined the secrets of the mountain. Then the mountain incarnate came to him. He saluted Varni and started praising him, "Oh Lord! You have come here only for my sake. I am greatly honoured by your darshan."

Then the great sages got up inspired by the arrival of God. They started flocking near him. Nilkanth feigned ignorance and asked the mountain deity, "Your *maya* is beyond comprehension. Who are you? Who are these great sages? What are these *agni kunds* for?" The mountain deity smiled on hearing these questions. He said, "Your show of ignorance is baffling me. You are all-knowing. Since you have asked I am telling you. I am the most sacred among all mountains. Nine hundred thousand great sages live here. They have been performing austerities for ages to have your darshan. These miracles are due to their austerities. In the *kunds* opposite their ashrams there is water during day and fire at night. When the fire

appears, great sages also appear. In daytime nothing is visible. No human can come here."

Nilkanth started shaking his head in surprise. He told them, "You are all great people!"

The sages replied, "We have undertaken these austerities and rituals to understand your greatness. That is why there are some great traits in us. But before you, we are very ordinary people." Nilkanth understood their sentiments, devotion and their desire to realise God. He assumed nine hundred thousand forms and presented himself before each of the sages. He fulfilled their ardent desire of having his individual darshan. Then he withdrew all the forms into himself and gave a special discourse to them. "Through yoga one attains special powers, but, with it there are many obstacles. To attain moksha you have to submit to God's will and perform bhakti with humility."

The sages understood the essence of Nilkanth's words. They realised that in yoga one does not have the association of God incarnate and without this one cannot master yoga. But today, by the grace of God they received the fruits of their endeavours. They resolved to remain absorbed in the *murti* of Nilkanth to retain their yogic achievement. Nilkanth blessed them with the realisation of his divine form and redeemed them. He stayed there for three days and left the place.

Nilkanth proceeded northwards towards Ramkot. He wanted to go there because the people of that place revered sadhus immensely. Each household fed them and took their *prasad*. But such indulgence would come as an obstacle to moksha and cause sadhus to regress so he gave up the idea and went to Balvakund instead.

Balvakund and Gangasagar

Nilkanth walked on to Balvakund. Balvakund is situated four miles from Sitakund. Balvakund has many underground hot water springs. The water is very hot but Nilkanth used to bathe in it daily during his stay there. Other pilgrims used to look at this in amazement. They were surprised at this accomplishment of a 16-year-old *brahmachari* who could bathe in searing hot water. But Nilkanth did not bathe there to show off his powers. He merely did so to sanctify the waters. He stayed there for three days. He left Bang Desh and came to Gaud Desh. He reached the holy place of Gangasagar after visiting Nadia (Navdvip) and Shantipur.

Gangasagar is 38 miles from Kolkata. One can reach there by steamer or boat from Diamond harbour. The festival of Makarsankranti (Uttarayan), which lasts for five days, is very famous here. Pilgrims bathe in the sea. The place has the Vishalakshi mandir. There are other ancient mandirs, too. Nowadays the flow of the Ganga has reduced here considerably and it does not appear to be a meeting place of Ganga and the sea. The river flows as a small stream at this point. Nilkanth stayed for three days and bathed at the place of confluence. He gave darshan to the pilgrims who came to celebrate Makarsankranti. But no one recognised him to be a great soul. Pilgrims remained immersed in rituals and in performing *shraddh*. Varni left the place by boat on the third day and came to Sagardvip to visit Kapil ashram at Sundarvan.

Nilkanth at Kapil Ashram

Kapil Muni was the son of Kardam Rishi and Devhuti. Kapil Muni, who was the founder of Sankhya philosophy, taught it first to his mother before he set out to perform austerities. He performed austerities at Sundarvan for a long time. To the

enlightened he grants his darshan there even today. If one has firm belief in God then he is present everywhere.

Kapil Muni was delighted to receive Nilkanth. He considered Varni's visit to be the fulfilment of his intense austerities. He was also happy that his Sankhya philosophy was going to be propagated correctly by Nilkanth among the people. Kapil worshipped Nilkanth. Varni blessed him and said, "I shall integrate your Sankhya philosophy with other systems of philosophy and propagate it as per your ideas and wishes." Kapil Muni was greatly overjoyed on receiving such an assurance from the resplendent Brahmachari. He got up from where Nilkanth was sitting and merged himself into the white *murti* of himself in the mandir.

Varni liked the quiet atmosphere of the ashram. He spent his time contemplating his own self. He sat in meditation for seven days. The pilgrims regarded this as a unique sight. They wondered whether Kapil Muni himself was engaged in rigorous meditation. From Nilkanth's dhyan, pilgrims learnt that they should withdraw their senses and endeavour to anchor them in God. Varni preached to the pilgrims, stressing the need to listen to a God-realised Sadhu to know about the glory of God.

At this place the earth assumed the form of a cow and appealed to Varni to rid her of the burden of man's sins. Nilkanth stayed there for a month. After completing his work here and satisfying the pilgrims, Varni resumed his journey. He came to a place which was full of dense trees. He walked under them throughout the night and in the morning reached a village. In a village on the way to Jagannath Puri, Varni redeemed a headless evil spirit. The king out of fear for the spirit had ordered that nobody should use that path, but Nilkanth passed through the place and when the spook tried to harm him, he redeemed it. In the second village, a wayward asce-

tic was observing no restraint in his relations with women. Varni preached to him about the true dharma of a sadhu, in which he should refrain from any contact with women whatsoever.

Meeting Jairamdas

Nilkanth then walked on to another village where he came to a Krishna mandir, looked after by an ascetic. The ascetic invited him inside. Nilkanth accepted his warm welcome and entered the mandir. The mahant was impressed at Nilkanth's radiant personality. The Brahmachari bathed and after completing his daily worship rituals, he offered prostrations to the *murti* of God and sat in the assembly.

The mahant was reading the Ramayan. Nilkanth saw that there were only two girls in the assembly. He asked the mahant, "Who are these girls?" The mahant replied, "There is another ascetic here who is married, and they are his daughters. They are very interested in the Ramayan. They have a brother named Jairamdas. He, too, is pious." Nilkanth did not reveal his curiosity about Jairamdas.

During the narration, some difficult words cropped up. The girls asked the mahant as to what they meant. But the mahant did not know. To avoid any personal embarrassment he explained it away. Nilkanth smiled at the mahant's answers. The girls looked at Nilkanth and understood that the mahant did not know the meanings. Varni asked the mahant, "With your kind permission can I explain?" The mahant agreed immediately.

Nilkanth explained the meanings of the words beautifully. The mahant was very pleased to hear him. The two girls were impressed by Varni's scholarliness and divine personality.

The two girls talked to their parents about Nilkanth. "He has an emaciated body, yet the lustre on his face overshadows the sun's brilliance. He has a bun of hair on his head, like a crown, therefore he looks like Shivji incarnate. His voice is like the song of a peacock, beautiful and mature. He is an embodiment of knowledge. He explains with crystal clarity the meaning of words. He never fixes his gaze on anyone. We think that he is God incarnate!"

On listening to their daughters, both parents became eager to see him. They had their own private mandir dedicated to Bhagwan Krishna. They decided to bring Nilkanth to their mandir. That same evening the married ascetic went for Nilkanth's darshan. He saw that his daughters were right in their description of Varni's divinity. The ascetic bowed at his feet and prayed, "Maharaj, come to my mandir."

"I will come if the mahant permits me," Nilkanth replied.

The ascetic humbly requested the mahant and the latter agreed. "You can take him, but take care of him."

Nilkanth came to the Krishna mandir of the ascetic. His entire family looked after Varni with great care and affection. The parents had asked their son Jairam to be in constant attendance on the young Brahmachari. Jairam was virtuous and served Nilkanth with loving care. He would bring lotus fruits from the lake every day and present them to him. The father and mother of Jairam thought it their good fortune that they were able to serve Varni.

Nilkanth was greatly pleased with their devotion and one night showed the family his divine splendour. A pleasant, blissful glow surrounded his body. Jairam and his parents forgot their individuality, and savoured the divine spectacle. They saw the divine form of Varni in the sea of light. They shed tears of joy and prayed with ardour. Nilkanth withdrew the light into his own body. They were convinced

that Nilkanth was none other than God himself who had manifested on this earth. They gazed at Nilkanth and said, "Oh Hari! we are yours. This Jairam is your servant. Please accept him."

Jairam and his parents resolved to serve Nilkanth in every way possible. They were convinced that the Lord who was present in the *murti* was none other than Nilkanth. By Nilkanth's grace they were blessed with divine vision.

Encountering Jambuvan

One day Nilkanth asked Jairam, "Where do you get these lotus fruits from?" The youngster replied, "Lord, there is a lake which is full of lotus plants. My friend, Krishna Tamboli, and I get the fruits from there." Nilkanth said, "Take me to that lake." Jairam eagerly replied, "We shall go this evening."

That evening Nilkanth, Jairam and Krishna went to the lake. Nilkanth was fascinated by the beautiful lake. He saw several lotuses that were in full blossom. He fixed his gaze on them and saw Lakshmiji in them. He made a sign to the goddess and said, "I shall install your *murti*. You are the *shakti* of God and therefore you have to be honoured. But those who forget Narayan while honouring you, you shall become a curse." When Jairam saw Varni standing still and gazing at the lotus, he shook him and said, "Lord, it is nearly evening. Shall we return home?" Nilkanth was still thinking. He saw a boat and said to Jairam, "Let us go boating for some time and then we'll return home." Jairam agreed with great reluctance. All three got into the boat. Nilkanth and Krishna Tamboli started rowing. As they were boating, evening fell and the lotus blooms began to close.

It was nearing night. Jairam said to Nilkanth, "Lord, shall we go back?" "We will go to the opposite bank and turn back," was Varni's reply. Both Jairam and

Krishna Tamboli were scared. Their hearts were beating very fast. But they could not ignore Nilkanth's wishes. When the boat touched the opposite bank, Varni instantly jumped ashore. Jairam was shocked by Nilkanth's action. He shouted, "O Varni! Don't go further. Out there is a jungle full of wild animals." But Nilkanth was not listening. He kept on going as the night advanced. Crickets were rattling incessantly.

Jairam remembered his mother's words, "Don't get separated from Nilkanth." Varni was going at a fast pace. Jairam was trying to keep pace with him with a pounding heart. He was terribly scared of the whole thing. Tamboli was with him. Despite the darkness, the young Brahmachari was walking as if the path was well lit. Both the friends were making vain efforts to keep step with Varni. They were frightened by the noise made by wild the beasts. Suddenly there was a flash of lightning. They heard a roar and a ferocious bear charged out of the bushes. It came towards them. "Ni..l..kan..th," they shrieked. Varni looked back and there was a glow in his eyes. He saw the bear standing near Jairam and Krishna Tamboli. Both were shocked beyond measure and were shivering with fright. Nilkanth said, "Don't be afraid of the bear. It will not harm you."

"It is going to tear us apart and you are saying don't be afraid." Jairam could just manage to utter these words in the dark forest. He started climbing up a tree. Something slippery passed over his hand. He knew it was a snake. He thought that was the end. On one side was a venomous snake and on the other a ferocious bear. There was no choice and his end was near. He was clinging to the tree trunk. The bear was upon him. He could feel its hot breath. He was feeling helpless. Then Krishna Tamboli bumped into him. Jairam was convinced that the bear was about to grab him and finish him off. He shouted at the top of his voice,

"Nilkanth!" Then Jairam recognised Krishna Tamboli's voice "Oh, is that you Jairam? "Yes, it's me. But where is Nilkanth? We are face to face with death and there is no trace of him." Nilkanth was standing nearby watching the whole scene. He was stroking the bear with one hand. He said slowly, "Jairam, don't be frightened. The bear is standing near me." Saying this he passed his hand over Jairam's body. The gentle touch calmed Jairam's pounding heart. Jairam saw that the bear was sitting at Varni's feet. Both he and Tamboli looked aghast at the scene.

Nilkanth placed his hand on the bear's head and said, "Now you go." The animal left. Jairam and Tamboli felt relieved. All three turned back and made for the boat. Both Jairam and Tamboli asked Varni, "Lord, you came to meet that bear! Who was he?" Nilkanth said, "That was Jambuvan. During Krishna's time he served him but he nursed a lingering doubt. Today, he got my blessings. Now he will be redeemed."

Nilkanth turned to Jairam and said, "I never act without purpose. There is a reason behind every action of mine. I came here to meet Jambuvan. I was going to go to Jagannath Puri straight from Kapil Ashram. But I knew you are a cultured individual and worthy of moksha. That is why I came to this village. It is not that I only visit pilgrim places. Wherever there are worthy devotees I go there in order to redeem them. Jairam! The bear will leave its mortal body and will be redeemed."

Jairam and Krishna Tamboli listened to Nilkanth in amazement. Then Jairam's heart fluttered with the fear that Varni would leave them and go in search of others to redeem them. In order to prevent him, Jairam held on to his hands fast. Varni knew what was passing in his mind and smiled to himself. He

felt that how could Jairam know that no one could stop him from going if he wanted to. He could not be bound by anybody or anything. He liked the bonds of love and bhakti. To such a person he would be constantly with him in one form or another. Then they came to the lake. The three got into the boat. It was late night. When they returned Jairam's parents were eagerly waiting for him.

Nilkanth thought that his work there was over as he had redeemed the bear, Jairam and his parents. Many more souls were awaiting his arrival. His mission lay towards the west. He had to leave. That same night Varni departed secretly.

7. In Jagannath Puri

1797-1798

Early in the morning Jairam got up as usual to serve Nilkanth. He went to see if Varni had got up. He found that his bed was empty. "Perhaps he has gone for his ablutions," thought Jairam. He began making preparations for Varni's toothbrush by providing a neem twig and hot water for his bath. But Varni did not turn up. Jairam was a bit worried. Jairam's parents were in a state of confusion. They did not know what to do and where to look for Varni. They felt as if they had lost a diamond which was in their grasp.

Everybody was worried and grief-stricken. His parents told Jairam, "Run to Krishna Tamboli's house and see if Varni is there. And don't forget to visit the ascetic's mandir. Don't return without Nilkanth." Jairam was greatly distressed. Nilkanth was his life. The separation from Varni was extremely unbearable for him. His parents were sad that Nilkanth should have left them in this fashion. They told their son, "Search and bring Nilkanth from wherever he is. We cannot live without him. Bring him, don't return empty-handed."

Jairam searched every nook and corner of the village but found no trace of him. He asked at the mandir where Nilkanth first came. "Do you know where Nilkanth

has gone?" The ascetic said, "When Varni came here he said he had to go to Jagannath Puri. So if you go to Puri you will certainly find him there." Jairam returned, picked up his clothes, took some money and set out for Puri in search of Nilkanth.

JAIRAMDAS FINDS NILKANTH

Jairam wandered for twenty days. Then, due to his devotion and affection for Varni, he saw him at a distance. Jairam ran to him and bowed at his feet. Nilkanth raised him and embraced him. Jairam tearfully held Nilkanth's hands. He placed Varni's hand on his heart and said in a trembling voice, "Brother! You are God. You don't need anybody's support. But we are all living entirely dependent on you. Why did you leave us?" Nilkanth smiled on hearing his affectionate words. Before Varni could say anything Jairamdas said, "Nilkanth! Let us return home. My parents are anxiously awaiting our return. They were remembering you and constantly crying. They have abstained from taking food and water. We should leave for home at once."

Nilkanth knew that the love Jairam had for him was the same love he had for his parents and relatives. Nilkanth felt that this type of attachment that worldly devotees have for him was superficial. Yet that was the way of the world which he had to change. This type of devotion will not pierce the veil of *maya*. Varni said to Jairam, "Come with me, we will go to Jagannath Puri." But Jairam's mind rebelled at the suggestion. He had to take Varni home at any cost. So he insisted that he should return home.

Nilkanth told him, "Jairam! The love of relatives is full of attachment. It is like a noose of *maya*. You are inclined towards God. That is why I am telling you to come

with me!"

Jairam's mind became steady on hearing this. He had no intention of leaving Varni nor his home forever. He did the next best thing. He decided to accompany Varni to Jagannath Puri as per his wish. He thought that after staying for some time with Varni at Puri he would then take him home.

The young Brahmachari wanted to show his divine form to Jairam. It was because of his virtues that Varni had desired to shower his grace upon him. He knew that through Jairam great deeds would be performed in future. Many other devotees had to be redeemed. That was why he was taking Jairam with him.

After walking for some time they came to a dense forest. Nilkanth entered it without fear. But Jairamdas began dragging his feet. Nilkanth asked, "Why are you scared? If you want to come with me you have to give up fear." The wild beasts, with their roars and growls, were the embodiment of death. Snakes hissed and entwined round his feet, compounding the fear induced by the thick forest; all this convinced Jairam that death was at hand. Then he saw a well. Jairam started drawing water. Nilkanth filtered the water, drank it and found it sweet. He asked Jairam to fill the trough so that animals could come and drink it. Jairam complied. No sooner was the trough full Nilkanth put his feet in the trough and let out a shout. On hearing this the animals began to troop in. Deers, elephants, wolves, cheetahs and tigers gave up their individual nature and came together to the trough to quench their thirst in perfect peace. Jairam was greatly surprised by Nilkanth's powers. A sudden change came over him. His entire body experienced great bliss. His attitude towards Nilkanth changed. He was convinced more than ever that Nilkanth was not of this world. His attraction for Nilkanth increased all the more.

After travelling for some distance they came to a Shiv mandir. It was already night and Varni decided to rest there. Jairamdas was sleeping by his side and thinking of Varni. Sometimes he thought of his parents and resolved that he would stay at home till their death and thereafter join Nilkanth and serve him permanently.

Jairamdas Experiences Nilkanth's Divinity

Then Nilkanth placed his hand on Jairam's head. He felt an electrifying effect as a result of the touch. He felt as if somebody was pulling his nerves; and then he became unconscious. Thereafter, by Nilkanth's grace, Jairam experienced samadhi. Nilkanth showed him his Akshardham, where Jairam saw Varni seated on his glorious throne. After witnessing this resplendent form, Jairam forgot his temporal nature. He joined the ranks of the immortal redeemed ones and began to worship Nilkanth's lustrous form. Varni cast a glance at him. Then Jairam assumed his normal physical state. When this happened he felt a shock like being flung into a deep valley. His heart began to pound at a very fast rate. He derived courage from the fact that he was sleeping by the side of Nilkanth.

Jairam saw Nilkanth's divine form while in samadhi. That supreme form became anchored in his mind. He was overwhelmed with joy. He caught hold of Nilkanth's hand. Nilkanth sat up. He asked him, "Jairam, are you afraid?" He replied with tears in his eyes, "Yes, my Lord. I am terribly afraid that you might leave me." Nilkanth put his hands on his shoulder and said, "Jairam whoever comes in contact with me I never leave him. Don't be afraid. Even if you get separated from me you will be able to join me." Jairam regained his confidence. He was convinced that Nilkanth would accompany him to his village.

Even after seeing the glorious form of Nilkanth and enjoying his divine bliss, Jairam was unable to overcome the influence of *maya*. He was still attached to his house, mother, father and relatives.

Nilkanth and Jairam made preparations to go to Purushottampuri. There was a gulf which they would have to cross by boat. Nilkanth asked Jairam to hire a boat. He set out in search of a boat. In the meantime the tide came. All the boats that were stationed there were moving out. Nilkanth got into a boat. Jairam was still bargaining with a boatman. He saw Nilkanth sailing away in a boat. He felt sorry that because of his haggling with the boatman he got separated from Nilkanth. His greed made him part from Nilkanth. Jairam stayed there for the night and set out the next day and reached the opposite bank.

In Jagannath Puri

Nilkanth crossed the gulf, got down from the boat and started walking. He came to Bhuvaneshwar, a holy place, which is near Jagannath Puri. Varni had the darshan of Mahadev at Bhuvaneshwar. He stayed there for three days. Then he went to Janakpur. It is about a mile from the Jagannath Puri mandir. The Janakpur mandir is also called the Gudiya mandir. Nilkanth stayed here at the Indradyumna lake. Varni would go to Puri daily and have darshan of Jagannathji and sit in meditation there. He would listen to the Bhagvat narration every day. The stone mandir pinnacles were facing the east. Nilkanth would sit beneath the mandir dome (in the mandap) near the Garudstambh.

The mandir priest was greatly impressed by the piety of Nilkanth. He would sometimes give him the offerings made to Jagannathji as *prasad*. Nilkanth bathed in the sea daily. There was a large banyan tree outside the mandir under which

Varni would sit. He used to go to the Chandan Sarovar to do yogic exercises. If someone gave him something he would offer it to Thakorji first and then eat it himself. If he got nothing to eat, he would subsist on air. If anyone came to him he would preach about noble conduct. Those who came to him for spiritual inspiration experienced a mental state free of worldly thoughts and deep peace. Seeing these qualities in Nilkanth, people were greatly attracted towards him.

Word reached the king* that a great ascetic had come to town. He pilgrimaged his way for the darshan of Nilkanth. On meeting him the king prostrated and experienced bliss at Varni's darshan. "Varniji," he humbly expressed, "we are blessed and honoured to have you here. This place too is blessed. I wish that you stay here." Nilkanth was pleased by the king's sentiments.

On the second day after Nilkanth's arrival in Jagannath Puri, Jairam arrived and searched for Varni. He felt immensely happy when he found him. Varni knew that Jairam was a pious soul who could not live without him. Nilkanth was equally happy to see him again.

Gradually Nilkanth became the centre of attraction of the devout in Puri. Even the king came for his darshan daily. He would listen to the discourse on Krishna bhakti. After the monarch came into contact with Varni, his attitude to life became detached. When Varni delivered discourses it looked as if he was able to read the minds of the devout and then speak on their inner thoughts. Seeing this gift in Nilkanth, even the king accepted Varni as his guru. Nilkanth administered the Krishna mantra to the king. Knowing him to be a pious soul of a high order,

* At that time the Bhonsles of Nagpur were ruling in Orissa. The Governor of Orissa was Rajaram Mukunddev Pundit. He used to stay in Puri. He performed some rituals connected with the Jagannath mandir. He cleaned the chariot of Bhagwan Jagannath and decorated the deities with flowers. Later, instead of the king, some officials did this work.

Varni blessed him with samadhi. The king experienced a divine light and saw the supreme God. Then he realised that Bhagwan Jagannathji was no other than Varni himself.

After coming out of samadhi the king began to repeatedly prostrate before Nilkanth. Seeing this the respect of the assembled devotees for Varni increased all the more. Whenever anybody brought something Nilkanth offered it to the Shaligram and returned it. He would not keep anything for himself. He never tired of telling people to worship God with devotion as true devotees. He would also give advice on their questions concerning worldly matters. Therefore, the young and old equally came to love Nilkanth. When the devout came for his darshan they had the same satisfaction as they gained by the darshan of Jagannathji himself.

Fake Ascetics

The devotion which the king, his subjects and the pilgrims were showing to Nilkanth enraged the naked ascetics who were camping by the Indradyumna lake. There were several of their ilk – Vam Panthis, Shakti Panthis, Tantrics and those belonging to the Kaul sect – who made it a point to put on saintly airs to cheat people by threatening them with dire consequences if they did not follow them. This was all a show put up to fill their stomachs and satisfy their desires. These ascetics felt threatened because of the young Brahmachari's growing popularity. The ascetics felt that the young sadhu did not fit into their class and should therefore be taught a lesson. It appeared that God himself had decreed them to entertain such thoughts. Just as the fire which comes out of wood as a result of friction destroys the wood, similarly the anger within the ascetics' minds would ultimately destroy them. As the passion of evil people ultimately destroys them, the wayward

ascetics were soon to meet their destruction. They were always fighting amongst themselves over wine, women and food. They were a menace to saintly conduct. They thought that Nilkanth had to be taught a lesson otherwise he would harm their interests.

At that time there was no shortage of such characters. The fake ascetics were found everywhere. Armed to the teeth with *trishuls*, swords, muskets and other non-descript weapons, they would roam about, holding society to ransom. They had no fear of sin.

It was Nilkanth's mission to change their ways. As people came flocking to Nilkanth the fear increased in the minds of these fake sadhus that Varni's reformist preaching would put an end to their malpractices. The king, his subjects and pilgrims were drawn towards Varni; nobody was coming to their side. They considered him to be a thorn and wanted to remove him altogether.

As Nilkanth stayed at the same place in Janakpur where the ascetics were camping, large crowds would come there to seek his blessings and guidance. This included the king. Nilkanth went daily to the Indradyumna lake for a bath. After bathing he meditated on the banks of the lake. The wicked ascetics would lift him and put him under a tree. Even though he was meditating, they would shake him. But this would have no effect on him.

Nilkanth Varni Honoured in Rath Yatra

On Saturday, June 16 1798 (A.S.1854, Ashadh *sud* 2), the famous Rath Yatra Festival of Bhagwan Jagannath arrived. People from all corners of the country flocked to Puri to participate in the mega festival. The local ruler offered his obeisance to Jagannath, Baldev and their sister Subhadra as per ancient tradition, by

sweeping the road in front of the chariots. Only then is the *rath* (chariot) allowed to move. The deities are taken out in a grand procession to Janakpur Gondia Mandir.

According to the Purans the *murtis* of Jagannathji, Baldev and Subhadra were sculpted by Vishwakarma, the celestial architect, at the Gondia Mandir. The king also joins his people in pulling the chariot. The practice continues even to this day although there is no monarchy in Orissa.

On that occasion the king made Nilkanth sit in a huge, specially decorated chariot. People started pulling his chariot, too. This was not to the liking of the *trishul*-wielding ascetics. They thought that the king and his people were giving undue importance to Nilkanth.

The Rath Yatra ended at Gondia mandir. After some rituals of worship, the three *murtis* were installed in the mandir. There are no other *murtis* there except that of Lakshmiji. Most of the people then left. Nilkanth, however, stayed on. Seeing this, the king and some devotees also stayed back.

Nilkanth went to the Indradyumna lake for his daily bath with a specific purpose. He wanted to draw the attention of the king and his subjects to the lawless, licentious behaviour of the fake sadhus. He also preached about the qualities of a genuine sadhu. The king and his people saw the objectionable behaviour of the ascetics by the lake. Both the king and his people realised that they had made a mistake in honouring the ascetics whom they believed to be true sadhus. They became averse to their misconduct and felt that these impostors were mere parasites living off society.

The ruler said to Nilkanth, "These sadhus should be punished." Varni smiled and then said, "They will not be reformed if you punish them. Their sins will destroy

them." The king fell silent. He bowed to Nilkanth's moral courage and patience. The young Brahmachari knew that as long as faithful people like the king and the others were there the ascetics would not be in a position to create any unrest. So Nilkanth told the king, "Now you go back to Puri. I shall meet you there when I come for darshan." The order appeared a bit tough. But as desired by Varni, everybody left for Puri.

Nilkanth had to defeat the elements that subsisted on *maya* by practising witchcraft and other black arts. That was why he left Janakpur and came to stay at the Indradyumna lake. After performing his morning ablutions, he would bathe and sit in meditation. If nobody offered him any alms he would subsist on air. In order to harass him the ascetics would make him run errands. He would cheerfully do any work that was not objectionable. Some of the ascetics did not like the harassment to Varni. In this way two groups of ascetics were formed – one group would harass the young Brahmachari and the other group would spring to his defence.

Fake Ascetics Destroy Themselves

On one occasion, Nilkanth, after performing his ablutions and taking his daily bath, was sitting in meditation. One of the fake sadhus came up to Varni to give him some work. As he was meditating, the sadhu started shaking him. When he opened his eyes, the sadhu said, "Why are you sitting here like this? Go and pluck some spinach leaves." Nilkanth said, "I shall not pluck the leafy vegetable because it will amount to violence." The sadhu was angry because Nilkanth had defied him. He rushed at Nilkanth with a drawn sword to kill him. Nilkanth was sitting with firm determination and without any fear. Jairam who was with Varni saw this and started

shouting. This attracted the attention of the other ascetics. One of them saw the sadhu with the upraised sword intending to kill Nilkanth. Immediately he killed the sadhu in one stroke of his sword. This raised a storm. The two rival groups of sadhus resolved to fight it out.

Trumpets, horns and drums were sounded. The ascetics entered the fray. On one side were those who belonged to the slain sadhu's group and on the other side were those who opposed them. The fighting started. But nobody knew who fought against whom and for what reason. Like an uncontrollable fire each fought against the other. Nilkanth was quietly watching. Jairamdas did not have the nerve to interfere. He ran from there till he reached Puri to inform the king about the fighting. He thought that it was the only way to save Nilkanth. When Jairam reached Puri he was short of breath. He uttered to the public, "Nilkanth's life is in danger. Please save him."

Everybody was concerned. The king came to hear the news of the war. He ordered his elite guards and soldiers to the scene urgently. Jairamdas was running ahead while the king and his army followed him on horses. In a short while all reached Janakpur. When the ascetics saw the army they were frightened and tried to escape. But the soldiers killed a number of them. Soon the whole place was filled with the severed limbs of the ascetics.*

* According to an aged ascetic, the fight lasted off and on for a period of two months. "On a certain day a thousand ascetics were killed. On another day 500 lost their lives. On yet another day there were 200 fatalities and some other day around 100 were killed." This was narrated by an ascetic who was 120 years old when he gave the interview to Swami Nandkishordasji in 1898 (A.S. 1954). The ascetic himself was a youth when the fighting took place. He said that the fight started because an illustrious 16-year-old sadhu, called Nilkanth, refused to pluck leafy vegetables as ordered by an ascetic. The Brahmachari had such immense lustre that one group of sadhus wanted to make him their follower. The aged ascetic actually witnessed the fighting in which over 10,000 sadhus perished. "The image of the resplendent

After the fighting was over, the king and his servants started worrying about Nilkanth. Varni was sitting at Indradyumna lake absorbed in meditation. The ruler was surprised to see the young Brahmachari in that supreme state of unconcern when a battle was raging all around. He told him with folded hands, "It is neither safe nor proper for you to live here. Please come to my palace." Nilkanth said, "Of what use is a palace to an ascetic! To overcome bodily desires ascetics renounce the world. How can I then enjoy the comforts of the palace. Don't be worried about me. I shall deliver discourses to those who are inclined towards God among the remaining ascetics and will worship God. Please depart in happiness." The king remembered the divinity of Varni when he had experienced samadhi. He savoured his lustre and prostrated before him. The king said with folded hands, "The good fortune of serving you has not yet come my way. But please remember me. I shall come and serve you whenever you need me." Nilkanth was pleased by the sentiments expressed by the king and blessed him.

The army of wicked ascetics got wiped out by their own misdeeds. Nilkanth merely exercised his intellect; he did not do anything to bring about their destruction. He thought that his work at Puri was over, now that the fake sadhus had been destroyed. He had been staying at Puri for ten months. During that time he used to enter the *murti* of Jagannathji and observe the piety and deception on the part of the priest there.

Jagannath Puri is one of the four principle pilgrim places of India. It is also known as Purushottamkshetra. But Nilkanth saw a lot of impiety and desire on the part of pilgrims to stick to mere rituals without true bhakti. It looked as if

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Brahmachari refuses to go from my mind. I do not know what happened to him subsequently," the aged ascetic said of the future Bhagwan Swaminarayan.

everywhere the desire to attain moksha was weakening. *Adharma* got an easy access. These negative tendencies were especially visible in places of pilgrimage. Nilkanth pondered for a while on these matters, then shook his head and got up to resume his journey. He travelled 30 miles westward and crossed the river Maha and entered the region of Tilang (Andhra Pradesh).

Nilkanth's next stop was at Adikurma, a pilgrim place. Here, the Adikurma Mandir has the *murtis* of Lord Kurma, Govindraj (Shri Vishnuji), and Bhudevi and Shridevi.

He travelled downstream of the rivers Godavari and Krishna and came to the mandir of Panna-Nrusinh, around 10 km from Vijaywada. He then left the place along with Jairam. Both of them entered a dense forest. Jairam by now had become fearless of dense jungles. He started walking behind Nilkanth. As Varni maintained a furious pace, Jairam had to virtually run after him. Jairam never asked Nilkanth where he was going or why, because he was convinced that Varni never went to a place without a purpose. He, therefore, used to walk silently behind the young Brahmachari.

8. In South India

1798-1799

At Manaspur

Then they came to Manaspur. Jairam had a premonition that something will happen there. Varni saw a large banyan tree outside the town. He wanted to stay there. But he found that a lot of ascetics were already camping there. So he changed his mind. He then came to the king's garden. On seeing the young Brahmachari the gardener came to him at once. He was familiar with the ways of the ascetics who were camping under the tree. They were armed with different types of weapons, would think nothing of using foul language and demanded cooked food from gullible people. They would take things from the state treasury as a matter of right and would generally enjoy themselves. They would always be smoking the hookah. Nilkanth appeared to the gardener to be different from these characters. He had a deerskin over his loincloth. His hair was tied into a crown on his head and it lent grace to his personality. His sacred thread *(janoi)* stood out on his body. His lotus-petalled eyes were exuding kindness. The *tilak* on the forehead added lustre and there was strength in the entire personality which could not be described but only experienced. When the gardener saw his beatific features he was

convinced that Nilkanth was stamped out of a different clay and was distinct from the ascetics who infested the place. He stood staring at Nilkanth.

A Unique Experience

Jairam, who was standing behind Varni exclaimed, "What are you gaping at?" The gardener came to his senses and at once folded his hands in salutation. On coming into contact with Nilkanth people could not help undergoing a change in their attitude. Jairam recognised the traits of a devotee in the gardener and said, "Brother! This is Nilkanth. He is a divine person. Today your garden has been sanctified by his arrival. We want to stay here." The gardener was silent all along. He was merely gazing at Varni. On hearing Jairam he realised what they had come there for. He once again looked reverentially at Nilkanth and said, "Most welcome my Lord, I have been waiting for you." Jairam was startled by these words. He wondered how the gardener came to know that Nilkanth was going to come here. In his ignorant state Jairam could not understand that the gardener, in his inner self recognised who Nilkanth was. He must have been thirsting for him for countless births. His wish was fulfilled today. He gave Nilkanth a nice, quiet spot to stay.

After the personal meeting with Nilkanth, the gardener became very enthusiastic to make Varni's stay comfortable and also to inform the ruler, king Satradharma, about the young Brahmachari's arrival. For, the gardener knew that the king was a pious man who was ever eager to serve the sadhus and give them alms. After making all the arrangements for Nilkanth, the gardener went into town to inform the king. He told the king that a young Brahmachari whose body is emaciated through austerities was camping in the garden. There is lustre on his

face which is not of this world. The gardener said that a mere look at him brings peace of mind. On hearing this the king became very eager to meet the young ascetic. He at once set out to the garden with his servants. At that time Nilkanth was meditating, contemplating his own self. He was sitting in a yogic posture.

The king had Nilkanth's darshan. He experienced great peace of mind, like a man who plunges into the cool stream of the Ganga to escape from the torrid summer heat. He experienced a bliss which he had never experienced before. He observed divine power and authority on Nilkanth's face. He wondered whether the Brahmachari is a combination of an accomplished yogi so characteristic of Shiv and bliss which is a hallmark of Narayan. These thoughts were churning in his mind, when Varni opened his eyes. When he saw the king in front of him, he asked him as to who he was. He said, "I am the king of this place. For a long time I had the desire to have darshan of a God-realised person like you. Today, my desire has been fulfilled. It is my good fortune."

For the all-knowing Nilkanth, who resides in the hearts of everyone, nothing was unknown to him. He had come specially to redeem the king. The king sat with folded hands before Nilkanth. The young Brahmachari knew that the ascetics belonging to the Vama and the Shakti cults were roaming freely. They were holding society to ransom. Whatever demands they were making, the frightened people were conceding. The gullible people considered their preachings to be dharma. Even kings were afraid of them. It was Nilkanth's mission to rid society of such fake sadhus and preach true spirituality. Nilkanth had come to remove that fear from the minds of the kings and subjects alike. He wished to stress on good conduct and teach the people what true religion was and its parameters.

Nilkanth explained to the king the qualities of dharma and *adharma*. He told

him about the moral code an ascetic has to observe. Wealth and women are such that they would disorient a sadhu from the path of dharma. An ascetic has to be doubly careful about these things. Anybody dealing with them will ruin his saintliness. Nilkanth alluded to the Purans and narrated to the king about how the austerities of great sages was spoiled by celestial nymphs and how they were hurled to the depths of sin. He added that God is the all-doer. Whosoever has his blessings need not be afraid of the fake sadhus or their curses. They will have no effect on staunch believers.

The king understood the essence of the shastras after listening to Nilkanth's discourse. He realised that all these years, out of fear, he had sustained fake sadhus by providing alms and whatever they demanded. The king repented for his ignorant act. Nilkanth told the king that ignorance and superstition were the greatest sources of fear in the life of an individual. Only he who is spiritually enlightened can suppress such fears and enable one to learn the true meaning of the shastras.

An Eye-opener

The king's eyes were opened. Nilkanth felt that as long as the monarch was not shown the character of the fake ascetics camping under the tree, he would go on supporting them. The king should be made to realise that he can no longer be soft on these fake sadhus. Once he resolves to be tough with them they will go away.

The next day the king went for Nilkanth's darshan. But midway he changed his mind and decided to go to the camp of the fake ascetics.

When the king reached the camp, he saw from a distance that the mahant of the ascetics was performing puja. He had several Shaligrams in his puja. He placed the Shaligrams in a vessel of water and then took them out, rubbed them dry and

placed them roughly on a cloth spread before him. Then he sloppily applied sandal-paste to each Shaligram. The king was surprised at the rough and undevotional manner in which the mahant was performing bhakti. Nilkanth's definition of a sadhu did not comply with these creatures and their antics. A few were smoking a cheroot, some were lying lazily, others were engaged in love-making with their wives and a few were counting money obtained in alms, etc. There was no trace of renunciation in the conduct of the fake sadhus. Then the king came to where the mahant was. He was telling the beads in a hurry and at the same moment he was scolding somebody for something he had done. He would every now and then brandish the trishul to frighten his disciples. The mahant's eyes were red with anger and excessive consumption of ganja. He was the exact anti-thesis of the sadhu that Nilkanth had depicted in his discourses. The king had by now a fairly good measure of the nature of these wayward ascetics. He came near the mahant who was busy putting back the Shaligrams. The king asked for a Shaligram. This annoyed the mahant, "Is the Shaligram a thing to be asked for? You have to worship it carefully." The king felt pity for and angry at the mahant, because he had seen his faithless manner of worship. Without any reaction the king went straight to Nilkanth.

The king told Varni about the Shaligram. Nilkanth said, "The mahant considers the Shaligram to be a mere stone. But he is keeping it to earn money and fill his belly. He knows it is his means of subsistence."

"Then why did he not give me a Shaligram when I asked him for it? I was ready to pay him a hefty price for it," queried the king. "It is a skewed characteristic of these ascetics. They may give their kingdom if they are pleased and the next day flay the same fellow," replied Nilkanth. But the king was eager to have

the Shaligram. He told Varni, "You send Jairam tomorrow to get a Shaligram from the mahant." Varni said, "He will not give it even to Jairam. Instead, his stubbornness will harden further." But the king was bent on having a Shaligram and he entreated earnestly that Nilkanth send Jairam to the mahant.

Jairam's Escape

The next day, Jairam approached the mahant for a Shaligram. He sat opposite the mahant and bowed to him. Then he said slowly, "Mahantji, you have got so many Shaligrams. Why don't you give me one?" The mahant was angry when Jairam requested him. "Look here, I said no to the king yesterday. Do you think you are greater than him?" Jairam's intention was to provoke the mahant. He did not have to wait long. When Jairam kept on requesting him for a Shaligram, the mahant was livid with rage. He picked up his trishul and stood up to strike him.

Jairam fled the scene and ran to Nilkanth. He ran at such a pace that he was out of breath. He told Varni, "Maharaj, he picked up his *trishul* to kill me." Nilkanth said amid laughter, "It is good that you escaped."

That night, by the will of Nilkanth, all the Shaligrams fell into the river Gandki. When the following morning the mahant wanted to perform puja after his ablutions, he found the Shaligrams missing and asked the other sadhus about them. They could not tell him anything. In fact, they had no interest in the Shaligrams. They held up their bags for inspection. The mahant was convinced that the king must have made the arrangements to steal the Shaligrams. Further, he recalled that Nilkanth's attendant, Jairam, had also come with a request for a Shaligram. Considering all these things, the mahant came to the conclusion that Nilkanth must have insti-

gated the king to commit the theft. The mahant provoked his sadhus.

The next day, Varni completed his ablutions and came to the garden for his daily puja. The pious king had given him a hand-rest made of sesame wood. Sometimes he would keep one hand resting on it while sitting in meditation.

Calm Despite Tumult

During Jairam's absence, the fake sadhus came to the place where Nilkanth was meditating. They started hurling stones at him with the intention of killing him. But the stones missed Varni. When Jairam returned, the sadhus fled the scene. Jairam soon found out that Nilkanth had remained unhurt, despite the fact that he had been the target of their combined attack. The stones were lying scattered all round. Nilkanth was in deep meditation. The tumult did not disturb him at all. Even Jairam could not wake him up. So, Jairam ran to the king to inform him of the attack.

The king, his soldiers and the citizens prepared to go to the garden. Meanwhile, the ascetics surged towards the town, fully armed, to attack the king's palace as they suspected him to be behind the Shaligram episode. But they were routed in the unequal fight with the king's soldiers. Many of the ascetics were killed and the remaining were driven out of the kingdom. The king was happy that the chapter of *adharma* had ended in his kingdom with the rout and destruction of the fake sadhus. After vanquishing the sadhus, the king rushed to the garden where he found Nilkanth still engaged in meditation. He noticed a heap of stones around Nilkanth but also found that he had escaped injury. The monarch realised the cruel nature of the evil ascetics. He understood the mentality of these vagrants who ate at the expense of others in the name of piety, without giving anything in return. He felt dis-

gusted at their behaviour.

One cannot become a true renunciant without true knowledge. That wisdom can be got only by spiritual association with God. Only such wise people can attain moksha. This eternal truth is described in our shastras.

Nilkanth woke up from his meditation. The king also came out of his thoughts. Now the king understood the truth. He said with folded hands, "My Lord, the ascetics misbehaved and created a commotion." Varni merely commented, "They have performed their role."

The monarch said, "Varni, if you order me I shall post my soldiers here to protect you." Nilkanth merely smiled, "The all-powerful God is with me. It is he who protects and will always protect me." The king understood that Nilkanth Varni was God himself.

Nilkanth accomplished his mission to uproot evil here. That same night, Nilkanth and Jairam left Manaspur. He knew that people who were supposed to be religious were spreading falsehood. If it was not checked and destroyed in a swift, surprising manner than irreligion would prevail.

On the way Jairam felt very thirsty. No water source was near at hand. He was in such a state that he could not walk any more. With the help of Nilkanth he climbed a tree and saw a lake that was quite far away. He caught hold of Varni's hand for support and just about made it to the lake. Nilkanth told him, "Now go and drink water." When Jairam returned he asked him, "Did you drink water?" Jairam replied, "How could I, the lake is full of snakes." Nilkanth went to the lake with Jairamdas and said, "Water snakes are not poisonous." Then he picked up a stick and pushed away the snakes and filtered the lake water into his gourd. Jairam was not convinced. Therefore, Varni drank the water first and gave

the gourd to Jairam. Jairam drank the water which tasted like nectar. Nilkanth smiled. He felt that a devotee, because of his fear of death, has no faith even in what God says. Only those who have no fear of death can become a devotee and a redeemed soul.

Jairam Leaves Nilkanth

Nilkanth and Jairam proceeded further. Now Jairam began to fall back. He thought that when his physical body could not keep pace with Nilkanth's quick stride then how could he keep pace with Nilkanth's mind and willpower! His body was accompanying Varni but his mind was with his relatives. The gap between the physical and subtle body was difficult to remove, and so he felt that he was merely tagging along with Nilkanth. His heart was not in it. He told Varni twice, "Nilkanth either come home with me or let me go." The young Brahmachari pitied his thinking. Even after seeing his effulgent form, Jairam was thinking of his people back home and was prepared to leave his company! This was simply amazing. Jairam's mind had already reached home. In the end Varni said, "If you want to go home, then you may go. I have a lot of things to accomplish. Whenever renunciation sprouts in you and when the ties binding you to your relatives snaps, then you come to the western part (of India). You can meet me there." So saying Nilkanth blessed Jairam. Jairam left Nilkanth. Varni started the next leg of his journey.

After a few days Jairam came to Purushottampuri. Here, he got measles and developed a severe fever and red rashes on his face and body. Jairam started crying. His eyes were also affected. He remained in this condition for quite some time. He thought that once he got well he would go straight to Nilkanth. But one has to bear

the fruits of one's karmas. Jairamdas bore the suffering for a longer duration. Around two to three years passed. But he was destined to meet Nilkanth and so he recovered and went towards the west.

Jairam later went to Gujarat and met Nilkanth at Loj. Varni, too, was very happy to see him and then initiated him as a sadhu and named him Swami Jignasanand.

Varni Redeems Tirupati Pilgrims

After leaving Manaspur Nilkanth came to Venkatadri. He had darshan of Lord Balaji (Venkateshwar) there. The pilgrim centre is on a hill. The hill is called Venkatachal. According to the Purans Bhagwan Shesh stays here in the form of a hill. So, it is also called Sheshachal. In olden days Prahlad and Ambarish saluted the mountain, because of its sanctity, from afar and went their way. Ramanujacharya had climbed the hill prostrating all the way to have darshan of Bhagwan Venkateshwar. Many devotees come to this place from different parts of India, especially the south. Nilkanth came to this place of pilgrimage to redeem pilgrims.

On the western side of the Pushkarni lake is the mandir with a beautiful *murti* of Lord Varah. It is a custom for devotees to first come to this mandir before going to seek Balaji's blessings. After having darshan of Lord Varah, Nilkanth sat in meditation under a banyan tree near the mandir. So impressive and attractive was his personality that devotees flocked to him for darshan. He gave darshan to numerous devotees during the three or four days that he sat under the tree. Thereafter Varni left for Kancheepuram.

Ungrateful Sevakram

On the way to Kanchi, he met a sadhu called Sevakram. He had learnt the Shrimad Bhagvat. Varni heard a recital of Bhagwan Krishna's *lila* from him. He was especially impressed by the love the *gopis* bore for Krishna. His heart was touched by the recital. He liked the Gopikageet the most and would ask Sevakram to recite it again and again. Varni wished to explain to him the significance of Gopikageet. But then Sevakram was only an orator and could not imbibe the meaning behind it.

The *gopis* had great love for Krishna. They gave up everything, their husbands, children, relatives and homes and became one with him. Even then at times they felt that Krishna had fallen for their looks and become their paramour. That's why he was dancing to their tune. Because of such arrogance on their part Krishna left them. The separation made the *gopis* pine for him. Without separation one cannot gauge the pleasure of union. In order to make the *gopis* realise their insignificance in the whole episode, Krishna disappeared from their midst. The *gopis* who thought that Krishna was at their beck and call now yearned for his company. The separation dissolved their arrogance and humbled them. They became united with Krishna through their mind.

Sevakram recited the slokas of the Gopikageet and Nilkanth was happy on hearing them. Nilkanth saw the extremity of love for God in the *gopis*. He started singing the Gopikageet.

Then suddenly Sevakram shook him. Nilkanth was astonished. Sevakram told him, "Sit down, Nilkanth." Nilkanth had to first set down Sevakram's 20 kg bundle, which he was carrying, before he could sit down. He did as he was told, and asked, "Why did you tell me to sit down?"

Anger was writ large on Sevakram's face. He said after catching hold of Nilkanth's hand, "I have recognised who you are. You are Ghanshyam who left home five years ago!"

Nilkanth was surprised. He wondered, "How did this busybody come to know?" But Sevakram persisted. He caught hold of his hand more tightly and said in a loud voice, "I am not going to leave you alone! Your relatives are all worrying themselves to death and you are behaving like a big renunciant. I shall not rest till I take you back to Ayodhya."

Nilkanth Serves Sevakram

Nilkanth smiled on hearing this. He thought that one who has become a renunciant and still remembers his home and relatives, who is not able to dissolve his mundane desires, is the most ignorant. He told Sevakram, "If you want me to stay with you or want my services, never mention Ayodhya. I am not bound by anyone. I am free and nobody can stop me from doing what is good." The expression on Nilkanth's face convinced Sevakram that he would not listen to him. On the other hand he was in need of a servant so he suddenly changed the topic. Nilkanth felt comfortable.

Sevakram would make Varni carry his heavy bundle. When they came to a village, he would give Nilkanth money to buy provisions. Nilkanth would cook food from the provisions and serve Sevakram. As for himself, Nilkanth subsisted on what he got by way of alms. He would never take even a single morsel from what was cooked for Sevakram. Sevakram never offered any food from what had been cooked for him by the young Brahmachari. Because of his gluttonous nature he got afflicted with acute dysentery. He became helpless. Nilkanth told him, "Don't worry I shall

serve you and take care of you."

They walked slowly and came to a banana grove on the outskirts of a village. Nilkanth asked the gardener to permit them to stay there. Under the banyan tree Varni prepared a comfortable bed of banana leaves, one armlength high. Then he helped Sevakram lie down. He frequently passed stool and blood. Each time Nilkanth would wash his clothes and replace the banana leaves without a murmur. He gave him herbal medicines and prepared meals to his liking and needs. For himself, Nilkanth begged for alms and ate the food he got. Sometimes he would not get anything so he fasted.

Nilkanth nursed him back to health in a short time. Sevakram recovered enough to consume one kilogramme of ghee and digest it. Even then Sevakram compelled Nilkanth to carry the entire load of his 20 kg luggage. Nilkanth served him despite his not caring to give him any food. Whenever Nilkanth spoke about God, Sevakram would not pay any attention. Nilkanth Varni learnt that he was not 'Sevak'ram but 'Shath' ram (faithless and false). He did not have love for God and did not appreciate anybody's virtues. Nilkanth felt that he should not stay with such an ungrateful person. Varni stayed with Sevakram for two months and then parted from his company and went on his way.

After a few days Varni reached Kanchipuri. It has been mentioned in the Brahmand Puran that Kashi and Kanchi were the two eyes of Bhagwan Shiv. Among the seven holy places believed to be giving moksha, Kanchi is one of them. It is also called 'Hariharatmakpuri'. Shivkanchi and Vishnukanchi are situated at a distance of two miles from one another. Varni had the darshan of the *murtis* of Shivji and Varadraj Vishnu. Through a question-answer session with the local religious heads Nilkanth learnt about their philosophy and left. His next stop was

Shrirangakshetra.

Nilkanth was immensely pleased to enter the land sanctified by Shri Ramanujacharya. Varni bathed in the river Kaveri-Ganga and advanced for darshan of Shri Ranganathji reclining on Sheshshayya. The place was crowded with devotees. But Nilkanth got a clear path to the mandir. The *murti* was four-armed. As the devout saw the splendid visage of Nilkanth they were drawn towards him like a magnet. Womenfolk made way for the supreme celibate. He got a clear path. Both men and women looked at him in wonder because of the spiritual glow that radiated from him. Varni prostrated before the *murti*. Vaishnav devotees were surprised to see the new type of *tilak-chandlo* on Nilkanth's forehead.

The Vaishnavs here, even after seeing the glow on Nilkanth's face, made fun of him. After darshan Nilkanth went to a garden by the bank of the river Kaveri-Ganga.

Focus on Morality

In the course of his journey Nilkanth would visit ashrams, mandirs and pilgrim spots. He would meet mahants and other religious leaders and ask them philosophical questions and explanations of *jiva, ishwar, maya*, Brahma and Parabrahma. He would learn their philosophy and minutely observe the character of the religious heads and their followers.

Brahmacharya is the principal means for attaining a spiritually realised state. Nilkanth had decided to re-establish the practice of *brahmacharya* which had become diluted by religious heads of the Kaul, Vam and Shakti Panths, and by that Nilkanth wished to make it easier for everybody to follow the path of moksha. He

would daily go to the mandir for darshan and also visit the mandirs in the surrounding area. He would then meet the Vaishnavs over there. From their lifestyle Nilkanth learnt that their Vaishnavism was confined to putting on the *tilak-kanthi* only. He pitied them.

The Vaishnavs who merely felt contented in carrying out ceremonial rituals would never see Bhagwan Vishnu in other devotees. Har (Shiv) and Hari (Vishnu) are eternally united. However the Vaishnavs who get incensed with the name of Har are not able to feel the love of Vishnu. And until their love for Vishnu spreads in the whole of the universe, merely wearing a *tilak-kanthi* does not make one a Vaishnav.

Nilkanth Varni saw that the mood over there in the mandir was that of not obeying the moral conduct. Even the priest serving the deities were engrossed in worldly pleasures. So Nilkanth explained to them with love. He explained to them the essence of Vaishnav philosophy. Despite the different philosophies, Ramanuj, Madhva, Nimbark or Vallabh the aim for the followers of each is the same – Vishnu Bhakti. One who is clear about the aim, will have and should have no ill feelings just because of differences in philosophy. The physical appearance of Nilkanth, his emaciated body, his austerities, celibacy, devotion, deep understanding of philosophy and his persuasive way of speaking, attracted the Vaishnavs to him. Despite his tender years most were convinced by his logical arguments and preaching. They gave up their pettiness and waywardness and enjoined themselves in devotion to God.

Nilkanth stayed at Shrirangakshetra for two months. It was nearly five years since he had left home.

Setubandh Rameshwar

From Shrirangakshetra Varni came to Mannargudi, which is also called the Dwarika of the south. He then came to Devipattan in the Dravid region. From there he crossed the Harbola Bay and entered Setubandh Rameshwar. He encountered many difficulties along the way.

Bhagwan Ram had built a bridge across the gulf to bring back Sitaji. There are four *dhams* (holy places) in the four directions in India, and Rameshwar in the South is one of them. It is counted as one of the 12 Jyotirlings. It is said that Ram installed a *murti* of Mahadev before launching the campaign against Ravan. The *murti* is known as Rameshwar Mahadev. The land is very ancient. It is believed that Agatsya Muni had his ashram here. The Pandavs also came here after their exile. Rameshwar is called Devbhumi because of its sanctity.

Nilkanth stayed at Rameshwar for two months. He would go for darshan of the Shivling at 4.30 am. Then he would go for darshan at the mandirs of Lakshmantirth, Sitatirth, Sakshivinayak, Jatatirth, Gandhamadan (also known as Ramjharukha). The devotees would have his darshan and bow to him. By his devotion, asceticism and faith Varni left a deep impression on the devotees. This was the only reason why Nilkanth, who had the power to redeem souls merely by his darshan, came to the pilgrim places. He would also minutely observe the management in the mandirs, puja rituals performed by the mandir priest, conduct of the religious heads and mahants, their philosophy, etc. Wherever he went he would see all such things, then decide something in his mind and leave. All these places were holy, but the gloss of spirituality had diminished. He wanted a land where desires diminish, and from where the message of *brahmacharya* can be spread throughout the world and pure philosophy can be delivered to the devotees.

His next halt was at the pilgrim place of Dhanushya. After staying there for a brief period he crossed the Harbola gulf and arrived at Darbhshayan. In those days the extent of Rameshwar was 75 miles. So all the holy places in the vicinity were known as Rameshwar. Then Varni took the northern route to Sunderraj, also known as Rishabhdev or Alagarswami.

On arriving at Sunderraj, Varni had darshan of the four-armed *murti* of Shri Vishnu. Because of the beautiful arms the *murti* is also known as Sundarbahu. It is a practice to install the *murtis* of Bhudevi and Shridevi on either side of Vishnu. The reason is that God's devotee is a part of God. So along with him he wants his foremost disciple (servant) to be worshipped with equal devotion. In this way, along with God himself, the prominence of God's foremost disciple would be revealed.

The Sunderraj mandir is situated at a distance of 20 miles to the west of the Meenakshi mandir. He might have visited the Meenakshi mandir, from where he proceeded northwards towards Bhutpuri. It is nowadays known as Sriperumbudur. On the way he passed through Devipattan. From then onwards he got on to the difficult forest trail.

Dense Forest

He came across a thick forest while going to Bhutpuri. The route was as difficult as the dense forest. Varni went straight ahead forging through the obstacles he encountered on the way. The route was full of stones, thorns, heaps of half-eaten fruits left by birds and coiled, hissing serpents with outspread hoods. Rabbits were scurrying all over the place. The cries of wild animals would weaken even the bravest heart. The forest was so dense that it was difficult to see the sun's rays even

at day time. Some of the trees were so tall, they seemed to touch the sky. Unmindful of all these sights, Nilkanth went ahead. He did not care for his body. He had his eyes firmly set on his goal.

He walked for four days in this manner. Since he did not get water, he could neither perform his morning ablutions nor puja. In the evening on the fifth day he lost consciousness and fell down. He regained consciousness after some time and saw a well full of clear water. He walked slowly and came to the well. The well was deep so he lowered his gourd to draw water. He drew water and took his bath. Then he sat to offer worship to his Shaligram. After drawing water to bathe the Shaligram a strange thing happened as he poured the water. The Shaligram absorbed every drop of water. Nilkanth realised that the Shaligram was also very thirsty as he had not offered any water for four days. Finally when the Shaligram got contented Nilkanth stopped offering water. Then he performed puja with sandalwood paste.

Without Food and Water

Then Nilkanth thought that just as the Shaligram was thirsty he must be hungry as well. But where was he to look for grains in this jungle? There were plenty of wild fruits and flowers. He was disappointed that he could not offer food to the Shaligram. He himself had not eaten for five days but that was of no significance to him. He was concerned about the Shaligram. The God who feeds the entire world, why has he to go hungry? But to fulfil the wishes of his devotees he becomes thirsty and hungry and thus merges his wishes with the wishes of the devotees. Although being God himself, he teaches the way of devotion to the devotee by his own devotion.

At that time a couple clad in the attire of sannyasis came. They were mounted on a bull (Nandi). Nilkanth wondered as to who this strangely attired couple could be in this impenetrable forest? That, too, riding a bull! Varni stood up the moment he saw them. He saluted them with folded hands. The couple's eyes turned moist with sentiments of sympathy when they saw his etiquette, courtesy and emaciated body. Nilkanth asked them in all humility, "O respected ones, would you mind introducing yourselves?"

The emperor among ascetics who is not a stranger to the entire creation was asking for their identity. This human trait in Varni amused the couple. They began to laugh. The lady's wish to serve was overt. She thought their delay in introducing themselves would delay their offering of food to Varni.

She said, "Oh Varni, let us get into this drama of introductions later. Right now you accept this *sathvo*. You have gone without food for five days."

Nilkanth stood there looking at the couple. The man was staring back at Varni. The young Brahmachari was greatly impressed by the man's devotion. Nilkanth said, "I don't accept things from strangers." Then he fixed his gaze on the man and woman. He said after a while, "I have a hunch of having met you before. Did we not meet in Haridwar?" The couple was overjoyed on hearing this. The lady said, "Lord, this is Shivji and I am Sati. You have not eaten anything for all these days, so we have brought *sathvo* for you to eat." Nilkanth said with a smile after Shiv and Parvati assumed their divine form. "On that day I was offered *ras-rotli* and today why only *sathvo?"* On hearing this Parvati was a bit perplexed. But Shivji answered. "She spent so much time insisting on coming with me that she was left with little time to cook a proper meal for you." Parvati replied, "But he waged such a wordy duel when I wanted to come with him that I was left with little time to prepare better food for

you." Nilkanth smiled once again.

Now it was Shivji's turn to speak. He said, "We will resolve our quarrel. Please accept this meagre offering we have brought for you." Nilkanth accepted the *sathvo* and offered it to the Shaligram. He then mixed water in it and ate it. Shiv and Parvati were looking at the divine spectacle without winking an eyelid. After that they disappeared from there at Nilkanth's wish.

Nilkanth then reached Bhutpuri and had darshan of the *murti* of Ramanujacharya. He offered worship and then left for Totadri.

Nilkanth liked the Vishishtadvaita philosophy propounded by Ramanujacharya. He loved the bhakti of Vishnu propagated by the master and so Varni was eager to visit the main seat at Nanganeri 20 miles away from Tirunelvelli. When Nilkanth reached Totadri he felt extremely happy.

The personal articles of the Acharya like his ceremonial staff, seat, conch, chakra are preserved there. It is said that Bhagwan's *murti* manifested itself from the Pushkarini (lake). Under the hood of Sesha, Shri Vishnu has been installed along with Bhudevi and Shridevi.

Nilkanth with Jiyar Swami

Varni met Jiyar Swami, a Tridandi Sannyasi and head of the Totadri seat. He got the imprints of Vishnu's weapons on his arms from him. He listened to Ramanuj's philosophical literature and liked his theology. The residing renunciants had no addictions and they were not keeping money with them, which pleased Varni. He learnt the philosophy of Ramanuj from Jiyar Swami. But Nilkanth disliked his association with women. Even his disciple sadhus mingled with women.

He politely told Jiyar Swami, "A renunciant is one who keeps himself away from money and women. Even the great have fallen from their path of renunciation because of these. Scriptures also describe the same thing."

After saying this Varni noticed a frown on Jiyar Swami's face. So he said with folded hands, "You are a learned man therefore I am saying this. Tell me something about *atma* and non-*atma*. Tell me the greatness of God. Explain to me about the sorrows of the body and those in the universe. Describe to me the bliss in Akshardham. You are a great man. That is why I have a desire to know these things from you. After you answer these questions I shall become your disciple."

Jiyar Swami was annoyed by the words of Nilkanth, who was a mere teenage boy. The talk of giving up women was unthinkable as far as he was concerned. The insight to see the body and whole universe as the source of sorrows lies only with those who have attained the realised state. He at once instructed his disciples, "Throw out this boy. Then only I shall take food and water. There is no need for such unworthy disciples here."

The disciples ran to the scene on hearing their guru's roar. On seeing them the guru started all over again, "He (Varni) wants to embrace the whole universe. It is like a mosquito trying to imitate the flight of an eagle."

After listening to the outburst Nilkanth merely said, "You are a sadhu. Such anger does not befit you." Saying this Varni stood up. He decided that it was not proper for him to stay there any longer. He left Totadri and proceeded to Kumarikakshetra (Kanyakumari).

Kanyakumari is the southernmost point of India. Here the Indian Ocean, the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal meet. The goddess Durga manifested herself from

a limb of God. Banasur had requested a boon from Shiv that he would forever remain unconquered. Shiv had granted him the boon but with an exception, "You shall not be killed by anyone except a virgin." When the demon saw Durga he desired to marry her. Durga said, "You must fight with me." And she killed him in the ensuing battle. The place is called Kanyakumari.

Nilkanth came over here. He bathed in the sea. Aso Navratri is celebrated over here and thousands of devotees flock to the place. So we can presume that Nilkanth came to this place around October 1799 (Aso, Ashadhi Samvat 1855). He stayed there for two or three days. From there he went to Lambe Narayan and Chhote Narayan. His next stop was Padmanabh (Tiruvananthapuram or Trivendrum) – the capital of Kerala. It is 51 miles from Kanyakumari. The giant, reclining *murti* of Bhagwan Padmanabh is in a mandir. Padmanabh is also called Anantshayan and it rests on Sheshshaiya. Such a gigantic *murti* is to be found nowhere else in India.

After having darshan of Bhagwan Padmanabh, Nilkanth visited Janardan which is 2 miles away from Trivendrum. There is a big mandir dedicated to Bhagwan Janardan. The four-armed *murti* is sculpted in black stone. A short distance from the mandir is a Vallabhacharya Bethak, a place where devotees of the Vaishnav Sampraday get together for prayer and assembly. It is said that Brahma had performed a *yagna* there. Even today smoke comes out of the *yagna kund* and is called Janardhan *dhup*. The site is also known as Brahma's place.

Varni had darshan here. His visit increased the glory of the pilgrim places and added to their sanctity and importance. So his spiritual wanderings renewed the sacredness of ancient pilgrim places and reawakened the glory of India's culture.

After having darshan of Bhagwan Padmanabh, Varni came to Adi Keshavtirth,

also called Tiruvattar, which is 12 miles to the east of Trivendrum. The mandir stands on the banks of river Tamraparni. There were evil ascetics, who harassed people endlessly. Nilkanth exposed their wickedness and inspired their chief to destroy them.

Nilkanth then proceeded to Melukote in the north from where he ascended the Malayachal or Malyavan mountain.

Melukote had been sanctified by Ramanujacharya, who stayed there for 16 years. He had renovated this place. In his dream Ramanujacharya saw the *murti* which was buried in the ground. He got the place excavated and installed the *murti*. The *murti* is that of Narayan.

No Fear of Snakes

Nilkanth then proceeded to Mt. Malyavan, also called Sfatik Shila. Here, Varni saw snakes entwined around sandalwood trees. But he was not at all afraid of them. He came there out of kindness to all sentient beings. The snakes came down from the trees and swayed harmlessly around Varni. Nilkanth's divine influence calmed them like sandalwood.

Situated on Malyavan mountain is the Sfatik Shila Mandir. The mandir has the *murtis* of Ram, Sita and Lakshman. The rock had been tunnelled and the mandir had been built inside. Nilkanth stayed there for five days. Varni had the darshan of Sakshi Gopal. The pilgrim place of Chakratirth is nearby. It is so called because the Tungabhadra river flows in the shape of a bow. The *murti* here is that of Kodandram. The river is deep here. The Rushyamuk mountain is close by.

Nilkanth came to Pampasar via Kishkindha. One has to cross the Tungabhadra

river to do that. Here there is the Sabari cave. Nilkanth spent some time in these places and then went to the village of Anagundi which is also known as ancient Kishkindha.

In Pune

From Pampasar Nilkanth proceeded to Pandharpur which is also known as ancient Pundalikpur. It is situated near the Chandrabhaga river, which is also known as Bhima river. The place has the Vitthalnath mandir which is also known as Pandurang or Pandharinath mandir. It is said that Krishna was immensely pleased with the devotion with which Pundalik served his parents and had come to grant him his darshan. When he came Pundalik was engrossed in serving his parents. So he slipped one brick for Krishna to stand on. Krishna stood on it awaiting the arrival of the devoted son. That was how it became a pilgrim place. Renowned saints like Tukaram and Namdev lived here.

Nilkanth spent two months at Pandharpur. Every day he would bathe in the Chandrabhaga river and have darshan of Pandurang. On the occasion of Devshayani Ekadashi and Devuthi Ekadashi big fetes are organised at this place and devotees of the Varkari Sampraday flock to the place on those days. From this it can be inferred that Varni might have visited the place around the month of November in 1799 (A.S. 1855). After blessing the devotees and giving them the benefit of his darshan, he went towards the north. He came to Pune which was then the headquarters of the Peshwas Dynasty. Nilkanth stayed in the garden of Bapu Gokhale, the Diwan of Bajirao Peshwa. Gokhale was a devotee of Krishna and a pious soul. His devotion brought Nilkanth there.

At this place today there are a number of buildings. But the residents say that

the original garden belonging to Bapu Gokhale was at this place. The Ram Mandir built by Gokhale still exists. It is called 'Bara Hanuman' as 12 *murtis* of Hanuman are installed in a circle just besides the mandir.

The gardener told the Diwan, "A resplendent ascetic has come to the garden. By merely looking at him one gains inner peace. His speech is sweet like nectar. He was happy to see the garden and after seeking my permission he came in."

The pious Diwan became eager to meet the young Brahmachari. He at once went to the garden. In fact it was his piety that brought Nilkanth to the place.

The Diwan's Experience

When Bapu Gokhale came for Nilkanth's darshan, Varni was absorbed in meditation. The moment the Diwan set his eyes on Nilkanth, he knew that his devotion to Bhagwan Krishna had been answered. The emaciated body of Varni clearly showed the arduous austerity he had performed and the difficult journey he had undertaken. The Diwan felt an indescribable joy when he beheld Nilkanth. He at once prostrated at Varni's feet. Nilkanth opened his eyes. The Diwan realised the truth that God comes at the doorstep of his devotee who is dedicated to him. The Diwan addressed Nilkanth with folded hands, "Lord, you have bestowed boundless grace upon me. I am overjoyed and blessed by your darshan." There were tears of joy in the Diwan's eyes. He said in a tremulous voice, "Maharaj, instead of living in the open why not stay in my house?"

Nilkanth, who preferred to live in jungles and mountains, said, "I am hesitant to stay in human habitations. Because I am staying here in a secluded place you will be eager for my darshan. Your mind and senses will remain focused here and you will worry less about your day-to-day affairs. To stay physically far from God

and yet feel his presence is one kind of yoga."

However, due to Bapu Gokhale's insistence, Nilkanth went to his house twice or thrice. After having his darshan, Gokhale's wife became inspired with bhakti in her heart. She felt fulfilled in worshipping Varni with sandalwood paste, flowers and preparing different items for him to eat. The affection so natural to women on such occasions finds expression in the form of intense bhakti. Intense devotion is sweet but so that it does not turn into infatuation Nilkanth added wisdom and knowledge. If one transgresses the moral code of conduct while engrossed in intense bhakti, then even if one is like Brahma one is likely to fall from the path of dharma.

Bapu Gokhale understood the essence. In bhakti, only devotion coupled with dharma bears the fruit of intense love for God. Many have encountered difficulties and obstacles on the path of sadhana when they had fallen from ardent devotion. That is why Nilkanth prescribed the importance of *brahmacharya* on the path of bhakti.

Bapu Gokhale spoke to the Peshwa ruler Baji Rao about Nilkanth's glory. Baji Rao expressed a desire to meet Varni. He extended an invitation to him. The young Brahmachari felt that the Peshwa, who was steeped in sensual indulgence, would not be able to reconcile with his own life of detachment. But because of the Diwan's insistence Varni went to visit the Peshwa ruler. Nilkanth at once realised that the Peshwa indulged his appetites to the full. His living was a negation of bhakti and *vairagya.* The Maratha ruler offered a variety of foods to Nilkanth. But the offering made by the ruler reflected his ego rather than devotion. Worn out by sensuous pleasures the Peshwa ruler did not have the insight to realise the true form of Nilkanth. So, Nilkanth preached a few words and took his leave.

Nilkanth stayed in Pune for one month. He channeled devotees coming to him towards the path of devotion. The blessed some with an experience of his true form and granted them the pleasure of attaining God. Nilkanth then moved on.

Fruits of a Brahmin's Devotion

Varni started his journey northwards. He had to reach Buranpur in Madhya Pradesh. On the way he came to Janabad village. A Brahmin was going to the Shiv mandir with his offering of water and other articles of worship. He saw Nilkanth travelling at the speed of Ram's arrow. He stood still. His inner self was engrossed in Varni. The Brahmin felt as if Shivji himself was coming in the dress of an ascetic or Swami Kartikeya was himself coming to give him darshan. His gaze was fixed on the young Brahmachari. Then Varni came near the Brahmin. He greeted Varni with folded hands. There was still darkness because of the pre-dawn hours.

The Brahmin thought before somebody sees this young Brahmachari he should take him to his house. So he invited Varni saying, "Maharaj! Please stop. Where are you going at this great speed?"

Nilkanth smiled and replied, "To a devotee like you who is waiting for me." The Brahmin was greatly surprised. He had been worshipping Shivji with single-minded devotion so that he could have the privilege of his darshan and blessings. "Are you not Nilkanth?" he asked. "Yes, people call me Nilkanth." The Brahmin felt that at last his prayers had been answered. The Brahmin was immensely happy.

Then the Brahmin's eyes fell on Nilkanth's head. He noticed the Urdhvapundra *tilak*. He asked Varni, "If you are Nilkanth then why this

Urdhvapundra *tilak* on your forehead?" Nilkanth, taking pity on the Brahmin's confusion, said, "There is oneness between Hari (Vishnu) and Har (Shiv)." The Brahmin inquired, "Then are you Hari or Har?" Nilkanth replied with a smile, "For Vaishnavs I am Hari, and for Shaivs Har." The Brahmin was happy on finding Shivji. He thought, "Instead of going and offering this water to the Shivling I can offer it to Shiv who is manifest before me." Then he poured the water on Varni's feet and also applied sandalwood paste. He said, "Maharaj, Shivji has himself accepted my puja. Please come to my house." Nilkanth accompanied him to his house.

After reaching home the Brahmin asked his wife to prepare food. But Varni said, "I have to leave at once so don't bother about cooking. Bring whatever that is available." The Brahmin inquired in the house and found curd. He mixed some sugar into it and offered it to Varni. Varni ate a small amount of curd, washed his hands and left.

Nilkanth came out of the village and saw the beautiful banks of the river Tapi. On the opposite bank was Buranpur. He left that place and came to the southern bank of the river. At that spot the Tapi meets river Mauna. As it was *ekadashi* the place was crowded with devotees who had come to attend the fair. Nilkanth was happy to see so many people congregating for prayers and worship on a holy day. Slowly Varni arrived at the place where the devotees had congregated. He wished to participate in singing bhajan with them. He went a little further and was shocked at what he saw. Men and women were behaving in an amorous manner. He at once got up and left the place. This was an unpardonable distortion of Krishna *lila*. In the Krishna *lila* there is divine union of *atma* with Paramatma, whereas here people were emulating Krishna to satisfy their lust. These people had

no idea what true bhakti was. He did not find a single place with the feeling of true devotion. He slowly retraced his steps and came to the place of confluence. Here also he left immediately because women were bathing in the river. There were men nearby, satisfying their sensuous desires by looking at them. Nilkanth disapproved of the unethical behaviour of men and women. Nilkanth kept on walking, lost in thought, until he found a secluded spot and had a bath.

With Two Merchants

After bathing, Varni sat under a tree. Two merchants of that village, Shivasha and Govind Sheth, had come to the confluence of the rivers for bathing. The two were returning home after bathing, with downcast eyes. Then suddenly they saw Varni sitting under the tree. He appeared to be new to the place. They came to where he was sitting. They were greatly attracted by his youth and magnetic personality. They touched his feet and sat in front of him. After a little while Shivasha asked, "Maharaj, you seem to be an outsider." "Yes, I am an outsider," replied Nilkanth. Shivasha detected something unique in the resonant voice. But he could not understand the essence of Varni's reply. Then he asked, "What is your native place?"

"*Sab bhumi Gopal ki* (The entire universe belongs to God)." Both the merchants were taken aback by the answer. Govind Sheth immediately asked, "Then why do you say you are an outsider?" Nilkanth smiled and said, "Because you have not recognised me, that's why!"

Both the merchants were true aspirants and felt that God himself had come in the form of Nilkanth. They requested Varni to visit their house. Nilkanth realised the depth of their feelings and agreed. They crossed the river to reach the Sheth's

house.

The Sheth had meals cooked by pious Brahmins, Bapubhai, Bhagwan and Ramkrishna. Shivasha and Govind Sheth, who were sitting near Varni, were constantly looking at him. So Nilkanth told them, "Sheth, one who acquires spiritual wisdom after so many births, attains God. One needs spiritual wisdom to attain God. And to attain spiritual wisdom one needs to associate with the manifest form of God or the God-realised Sadhu. One's past merits enable one to find the manifest form of God or his realised Sadhu. God or his realised Sadhu grant wisdom to true spiritual aspirants. That wisdom helps one to know the true form of God. And that knowledge grants one darshan of the manifest form of God. Then the *jiva* is liberated."

Both merchants were true aspirants. They became engrossed in Nilkanth's words. They felt that their past impressions had become ripe and that was why they had been blessed with Varni's darshan. To realise his true form, they wanted to retain Varni there. The young Brahmachari read what was passing in their minds and said, "One who meets a God-realised Sadhu and follows his instructions realises God." Meanwhile, the Brahmin cooks announced that the meals were ready.

Nilkanth got up at once and offered the food to the Shaligram. Then he sat down for his own meal. He added water in the food, mixed it and drank it. The amazed Brahmin cooks and merchants were surprised that Nilkanth just mixed the delicious food they had prepared with water and drank it. The cooks could not contain themselves. They said, "Maharaj, we prepared this sumptuous meal with great care in the hope of pleasing you. And you mixed up all the dishes, poured water and drank it."

Varni smiled and said, "When one is inclined to taste then one's senses are

drawn towards it. The mind and senses should always be tethered to God. Not even for a moment should they be allowed to stray from him. If a person engages his senses in material pleasures then his *jiva* becomes indulgent. In order to free the senses from worldly pleasures and to experience the incessant bliss of the true form of God, one should engage one's senses continuously in the manifest form of God. If the senses get bound by worldly pleasures then they would not get attached to God."

The Brahmins and merchants grasped Nilkanth's words. Varni stayed at the merchants' house for the night. He got up early in the morning and went to Raj Ghat for bathing. At that time pious people saw the young Brahmachari. Varni's intense austerities had made him emaciated, however, the radiance emanating from his face attracted them. They came to him and undertook vows. Then Nilkanth performed his ablutions and departed for Malegaon.

At Malegaon Varni stayed at a Shivalay on the western bank of the Mosam Ganga. The place was quiet and lush with vegetation. The river was flowing making a gurgling sound. He liked the place and bathed in the river thrice a day. He worshipped Vishnu three times daily. After the puja he used to recite the Ras Panchadhyayi from the Shrimad Bhagvat. He would wait for aspirants and talk to them about God whenever they came. In this way Varni awakened their past spiritual merits. He stayed there for five nights. When the flow of aspirants reduced, Nilkanth made preparation to leave the place.

Steady Path

Nilkanth always remained resolute in the direction he was travelling in. After leaving Malegaon he took the route to Dandakaranya and reached there soon. From

there he went to Nasikpur and bathed in the river Godavari. Varni's next stop was at Tryambakeshwar. He had the darshan of Tryambakeshwar Mahadev.

Nasik and Tryambak are among the holy shrines of the country. Every 12 years a Kumbh mela is organised at Tryambakeshwar. It is considered very meritorious to participate in the Kumbh mela. Maharshi Gautam performed austerities at Tryambakeshwar. Pleased with his austerities Shankar granted him his wish and the river Godavari appeared. The source of the river is at Brahmagiri. As Gautam Rishi stopped the flow of the river Godavari with Kush Darbha the place is also called Kushavart Kshetra. Tryambakeshwar is among the 12 Jyotirlings of the country.

After leaving Tryambakeshwar, Nilkanth travelled through a forest and entered Dharampur. He was greatly overjoyed by the scenic beauty. Then, travelling through the forest, he reached Surat.

Tapti, the daughter of Surya, the sun-god became a river called Tapi because of a curse. Tapi is counted among the seven sacred rivers of the country. The river has made Surat an important pilgrim centre. There is the Ashwini Kumar Ghat on the banks of the Tapi. It is said that the physicians of the deities, the Ashwinikumar twins, performed austerities here.

9. Sacred Soil of Gujarat

1799

In Surat, Varni stayed on a platform in the Godiya mandir at Nirvan Akhada. At the time of Rajbhog *arti* he asked the mahant of the mandir, "Bawaji, has the Rajbhog *arti* been performed?"

Showing the true nature of a wayward ascetic the mahant said amid laughter, "We do not offer anything in Rajbhog!"

Nilkanth smiled on hearing the irresponsible reply from the arrogant mahant. He himself had lived on air for long periods during his travels. So he was used to not having any food. However, the mahant's flippant behaviour became apparent.

Nilkanth did not get food for the next three days. On the fourth day a female-gardener came there for darshan. She saw Varni engrossed in meditation. Her intense spiritual inclination and Nilkanth's divinity transfixed her. She stood there for a few minutes. But Nilkanth remained unruffled in meditation. So she went inside the mandir for darshan and quickly returned. By that time Nilkanth had opened his eyes. The gardener came near and asked, "Maharaj, will you have something to eat?"

Nilkanth just nodded. The gardener immediately went home and brought pro-

visions for food. Nilkanth cooked food and after three days of fasting he offered it first to the Shaligram and partook of the *prasad*.

Nilkanth Varni had set out from Chhapaiya to redeem countless souls. His final destination was western India because he knew that spiritually inclined souls were awaiting to be redeemed by him. Still, he travelled throughout the length and breadth of Bharat (India). From north he travelled towards the eastern and southern parts of the country. On the way he visited many pilgrim places, observed the practices of sadhus and heads of mandirs, destroyed evil forces and liberated the spiritually inclined. Even then he did not find a single place to settle down to start his mission to spread Bhagvat Dharma and liberate countless souls from the cycle of births and deaths.

Gujarat is a hallowed land sanctified by great people. Bhagwan Krishna lived in Dwarika and carried out his mission, Muchkund performed his austerities, Narsinh Mehta and Mirabai sang their melodious bhajans and revived the bhakti movement. Nilkanth Varni chose this land to establish his Sampraday. He was still to meet numerous God-loving people through whom he would spread his work. But that meeting place was still far away.

He left Surat and came to the Ashwinikumar Ghat. The river Tapi was flowing from bank to bank. He came to the bank and walked a little distance. People warned him, "Sadhuram, the river is full of turbulent water. Let the boat come." But Nilkanth did not require it. He proceeded further. The onlookers took him to be an adamant ascetic.

People look at the sky to see God and carry out various spiritual endeavours to see God in the *murti,* but are unable to recognise the manifest form of God. The people by the river bank saw Nilkanth to be a stubborn ascetic. Such is the hard layer of

maya in the soul that it does not allow it to recognise the divine.

Nilkanth pitied them. He smiled compassionately. He knew that people in this part of the country were soft-hearted. When the veil of *maya* is pierced the inner light will become manifest and they will recognise God.

He dived into the water and as if walking straight ahead on the water he reached the other side. People were amazed at the miraculous spectacle.

Varni rested for some time on the bank and then resumed his journey. He reached the banks of the river Narmada. He got into a boat and sailed to the opposite bank towards Bharuch. After staying there for two days, he entered Pipli village. While he was passing through its outskirts he met Gulabsinh, a Kshatriya. The latter became instantly attracted by Varni's personality. He had seen numerous sadhus and mahants, but Varni was different. He requested Nilkanth with folded hands, "Maharaj! If you come to my house I shall have food cooked by a Brahmin for you."

Varni replied gently, "I like the trees in the forest better than houses in a village."

Gulabsinh was perplexed. He wished to have Varni as his guest and did not want him to go without sanctifying his house. So, he once again prayed with folded hands, "Maharaj, in that case please come to my farm. There are many trees there. You can rest under them."

A Sincere Devotee

Nilkanth was pleased by Gulabsinh's piety and accompanied him to his farm. He stayed in the barnyard there. Meanwhile, Gulabsinh brought provisions for cooking. Nilkanth went under a tree, lighted a fire and prepared food. He first

offered it to the Shaligram and then ate a little himself. The remainder he gave to Gulabsinh. He was fascinated by Nilkanth's method of preparing food quickly and neatly, his utter devotion while offering food to Thakorji, making food tasteless by mixing it with water into the wooden bowl, and eating each morsel chanting the name of Narayan; all this made Gulabsinh feel that Varni was different from other sadhus. He saw a very high calibre of detachment in his renunciation. This was indifference towards worldly things and bhakti towards God at its best. His renunciation was not a veil for pampering his body. It was genuine. He was above *tamogun* and had no intention to deceive the world. His righteous conduct made Gulabsinh feel that Varni should be retained at any cost. He said, "Maharaj, please stay here. I shall supply provisions for you daily."

Varni smiled and replied, "If I wanted good food, I would have stayed with the many kings I had come across in the course of my journey. They pressed me to stay on. But I wish to establish Bhagvat Dharma and show everyone the way to Akshardham."

Gulabsinh did not understand what Nilkanth said. His heart had become tender by Varni's darshan and in witnessing his acts. Meanwhile, Nilkanth got up, joined his hands and saying 'Namo Narayan' left the place hurriedly.

Walking towards the north of the Narmada bank, Varni came to Tavra. It is said that Kapil Muni performed austerities here. As evidence there is a Kapileshwar mandir. Varni bathed in the Narmada and had darshan of Kapileshwar. His intention was to sanctify all the pilgrim places on the Narmada banks. He went to Shuklatirth, which is one of the most important pilgrim places. The main mandir of Shukla Narayan contains the four-armed *murti* of Narayan.

ANCIENT SPOT

It is said that Chandragupta Maurya and Chanakya bathed at this place. This is also the place where Satyakam Jabali performed austerities.

The place has Omkareshwar, Adityeshwar and Gomeshwar mandirs. The Shulpanishwar mandir is situated near the Omkareshwar mandir. Varni stayed here at the Bawa Pyara's Ghat. He went for darshan of the deities in all the mandirs. The pilgrims showed interest in the newly arrived sadhu by offering namaskar before going their way.

After staying there for a few days Varni left for Ambali village. There Patidar (landlord) Keshavlal's wife, Rajbai, was observing austerities with a desire to have the darshan of God. In order to reward her for her good karmas, Nilkanth went to her home to give darshan.

He had visited hundreds of pilgrim places in India and met many spiritually inclined people, but he had never gone to anyone's house at his own request. Today he had come on his own to Rajbai's house because of her devotion. When Rajbai saw Varni she felt that it was the same form of God that she intensely desired to attain. She felt that her austerities had been answered. She felt fulfilled.

She washed Varni's feet and welcomed him to her house. She offered him fresh milk from her favourite cow which she used to offer daily to Thakorji. Varni took the glass in his hand and asked her, "Have you offered the milk to Thakorji?"

Rajbai replied with devotional love, "Thakorji has arrived here in the manifest form, he will drink the milk himself. Everyday he used to return the milk after sanctifying it with his eyes, but today he will fulfill my wish."

On hearing the devout words Nilkanth felt very happy. To imbibe and experience spiritual knowledge is ultimate wisdom. Her heart was inspired with this

wisdom. Today she had recognised the form of God which is described in the Vedas. She said, "Maharaj! Please stay here permanently. I shall give you milk everyday."

Varni's Promise

Nilkanth said, "From here I have to go to Ansuya, but I shall come to your house daily to drink milk."

The inner joy that Rajbai felt was evident in her eyes. Her voice became tremulous with emotion and her hair stood on end. Her frame began to vibrate out of ecstasy. She became desperate to fill her eyes with Varni's divine form. But Varni wanted to keep her thirst unfulfilled. After drinking milk he immediately left for Ansuya.

This sacred spot is on an island in the river Narmada opposite Koteshwar. Devotees come from Chanod by boat to visit the place. Atri Rishi had his ashram here. There is a mandir dedicated to Ansuyamata here. Everyday Nilkanth used to bathe in the Narmada and visit Rajbai's house for his daily share of milk. This went on for a week. After that he left for Vyastirth.

On the northern bank of the Narmada, opposite Sukeshwar, lies the village of Barkal. It is also called Vyastirth. Baldevji (the brother of Shri Krishna) had performed austerities here. That is why it is also called Sankarshantirth (another name for Balaram was Sankarshan). A short distance from Sankarshantirth is the Premeshwar mandir established by Prabha, the wife of Surya. It is believed that the ashram of Ved Vyas was situated here. By the side of the ashram is Vyaseshwar mandir. According to tradition Vyasji used his yogic powers and brought a branch of the river Narmada to the south of the ashram. From that day onwards the place

became an island. From Vyastirth Varni went to Chanod.

Chanod is a pilgrim place. There are seven main pilgrim places. Two evil men called Chand and Mund had worshipped the Sun. On that place is the Chandaditya mandir. There is also a mandir belonging to Chandika Devi who had killed Chand and Mund. Bhagwan Vishnu had washed his divine disc after killing the demon Talmegh. So this place is also known as Chakratirth. In addition to that Kapileshwar, Runmukteshwar, Pingaleshwar and Nandahrudnad are the other pilgrim places on the holy land of Chanod. Nilkanth had darshan of all the seven holy places. After sanctifying them, he went to Kanyali (also called Karnali) which is situated at a distance of one mile from Chanod on the northern bank of the Narmada. Kanyali is also known as western Prayag. There is an ancient mandir of Somnath here, which is also called Somtirth. As the moon deity performed austerities here, bathing here on the occasion of the lunar eclipse is considered to confer great religious merit. Varni worshipped Somnath and bathed in the Narmada. After that he left the place, spent the night at Dabhoi and reached Vattapattan (Vadodara) via Vasai.

In Vadodara

In the centre of Vadodara is the Mandvi gate with 16 pillars. Nilkanth stayed under the gate. It was already dusk when he reached the spot. But the radiance from his body was visible. Soon a crowd gathered round him. Some people saw divinity in him, whereas some saw the elegance of a prince in him. One of them walked through the crowd, went up to Varni and said, "O Lord, are you going to stay here? A lot of sadhus come to our town, but you seem to be of a different type."

A bystander said to another pedestrian, "Brother, our Sayajirao Maharaj does

not know of this ascetic's presence here. Otherwise, he would have come here and taken him to his palace." In order to quieten the crowd Nilkanth said, "Out of your friendly and respectful feelings for me I shall come here again in future."

Amichand Sheth Meets Varni

Meanwhile, the door of a shop opposite the gate opened and the owner of the shop, Amichand, came out of curiosity to the crowd. The crowd was gradually dispersing in the darkness of night. Amichand had a lantern in hand. When he saw Varni's face he felt as if he was witnessing the splendour of countless suns coming out of it. Though he was a merchant he was not commercially minded. In his heart he had a desire to attain God. His wife was also a devout lady. He gently touched the feet of Varni. Nilkanth looked at him. With folded hands Amichand said, "Maharaj! Will you eat something?"

Varni understood his sentiments and said, "Whatever is ready bring it."

Amichand rushed home and asked his wife, "Is the food ready?"

She replied, "I have prepared *khichdi*."

"Then quickly serve *khichdi* in a dish. A great yogi has come from outside. We have to feed him," Amichand said in a hurry. His wife had already had the darshan of the yogi. By merely looking at Varni all her worldly desires had been dispelled and she experienced bliss in her heart. She served *khichdi* in a plate and put ghee in a small bowl. Amichand took the dish and handed it over to Varni and sat before him.

Nilkanth dipped his two fingers in the bowl and put some ghee in the *khichdi*. He took only two morsels and then rinsed his mouth. Amichand took the sanctified *khichdi* home. His wife at once took the dish. She had decided to eat

the *prasad* all by herself. When they both sat down to eat, Amichand was thinking about Nilkanth. He forgot all about the *prasad*. His wife ate all of it, including the ghee. She underwent a sudden transformation. She was freed of all sensuous inclinations and experienced an indescribable peace and joy. She thought that although today she had served only *khichdi*, tomorrow she would make a sweet food for Varni. She requested her husband to invite him home early next morning.

As Nilkanth was preparing to leave, Amichand reached there. He prayed to Varni with folded hands, "Maharaj, our intention is to entertain you to a lavish meal, complete with sweets. Please come and eat at our place and then depart."

"I do not stay in the same place for more than a day. That is why I will go now," Varni replied.

"But Maharaj, I have not been able to serve you. It is as if the pilgrim place has come to our house but we have not been able to benefit from it."

Varni placed his hand on the trader's head and promised him, "Amichand! I shall take your services in future." "But what guarantee is there about my existence in the near future?" he asked in all humility. Nilkanth replied, "To preserve your body is in my hands."

On hearing this Amichand went back a couple of steps in amazement and resolved that Varni is God. He felt only God could decide when a body should end its earthly journey. He alone can decide the final moment. He asked, "Maharaj, what type of service can I render to you?" Nilkanth smiled and said, "There are the *murtis* of Lakshmi-Narayan buried underground in your house. I shall send my sadhus later on and ask for them." Amichand was wonderstruck as he was the only one to know that there were Lakshmi-Narayan *murtis* buried in his house.

His father had hidden the *murtis* out of fear that they would be confiscated by the king. Amichand's faith in the form of Nilkanth strengthened with this experience. He said, "Okay Maharaj! As you wish. I consider myself honoured that I will be serving you in this way." Varni blessed him and left the place.

* * *

Nilkanth left Vadodara and came towards the Mahi river. The river rises in the mountains of Malwa and meets the sea at the Gulf of Cambay. It is of great prominence in Gujarat. The Mahi is called the goddess of the four *yugs*. Nilkanth bathed in the river. The river felt blessed. The river had been flowing steadily to wash away the sins of the lawless Baraiya and Patanwadia communities living on its banks. They were notorious for stealing and dacoity. She was dejected all these years by the thought of what would happen to her as she was taking the sins of the people on her head. Now that Nilkanth had bathed in the waters, the river felt reassured that she would be freed of the sins of those who took refuge in her.

Meeting a Pious Soul

Varni crossed the river Mahi. Laldas of Navli village in the Charotar region saw Nilkanth. He at once recognised the spiritual excellence of Nilkanth. At that time Laldas had invited Brahmins living by the river Mahi to a feast in the *baval* jungle. The Brahmins were eating laddus amidst shouts of 'Har Har Mahadev'. Precisely at that time Laldas saw Nilkanth. Laldas felt immensely happy, as if his unfulfilled desire of several births was going to be fulfilled on that day. He at once rushed to Varni. Varni was also coming towards him. He had come to the place solely to meet this devoted soul.

Laldas prostrated before him and put the dust of his feet on his head. With folded hands he said, "My Lord, the food is ready."

Varni said, "I have not come here today for food. I have come for you."

Laldas' joy knew no bounds. He said, "Maharaj, I feel in my heart as if I had been expecting you for several ages and today you have come here. Just as a beggar gets a treasure of diamonds and feels extremely happy, I feel immensely happy at my good fortune in meeting you. Your darshan is difficult even for ascetics who are constantly engaged in meditation."

He caught hold of Nilkanth's hands and said, "Please come and have food with us. My *yagna* will be blessed and concluded in your presence today."

Varni went with him. When the Brahmins saw the resplendent *brahmachari*, they raised slogans of "Har, Har Mahadev." Nilkanth looked at them and smiled. The Brahmins were convinced that he was indeed Mahadev.

Laldas devoutly prepared a dish of various foods. But Nilkanth took only a little into a wooden bowl, mixed it with water and drank it. Laldas looked in amazement. He caught hold of Nilkanth's feet and prayed, "Maharaj! Please redeem me."

Nilkanth said, "I have come here only to grant you moksha. But I bless you with the birth of a great pious soul who will redeem his entire family."

As a result of this blessing, Kashiyabhai was born to Laldas. When Kashiyabhai grew up he came into Satsang through the company of Bhagvadanand Swami. He humbly served Acharya Raghuvirji Maharaj and the sadhus, shedding the pride of his birth in a noble community. Thus he fulfilled Maharaj's blessings.

Having blessed Laldas Nilkanth proceeded on his journey. He came to Bamangam. At that time Khoda Pandya, who had gone to offer *bilipatras* to Shivji,

saw Varni on the outskirts. He realised at once that the ascetic was of a unique calibre. He went to him and with folded hands requested, "Maharaj! Will you please come to my house?"

Nilkanth agreed without any hesitation. Pandya was leading the way and Varni was following. But the Brahmin was looking behind every now and then, to check that the young Brahmachari was really following him to his house. Nilkanth realised his fears and said with a smile, "Pandya, I shall bathe at your house, perform my daily rituals, eat and then go. Be at ease." Pandya was greatly surprised as to how Varni came to know his name. He became convinced that the ascetic was God.

Pandya prepared hot water for Nilkanth's bath. Then Varni worshipped Vishnu. For food, *dal* and *rotlos* were ready. Pandya wanted to prepare laddus, but Nilkanth refused. He said, "Bring *dal* and *rotlos*." Pandya brought the simple meal of *dal* and *rotlos* and placed them before Varni. He was happy for the chance to feed a distinguished individual. Yet at the same time he was sorry that he was not able to feed him with the items of his own choice. Nilkanth ate as per his practice by pouring water in the food. Pandya had not seen anybody eat like that so far. Varni rinsed his mouth, and after saying 'Jai Sachchidanand' he got up and resumed his onward journey. Pandya was not able to keep up with Varni's brisk pace. He folded his hands in namaskar and stayed back.

Nilkanth went to Anand from there. But he did not feel comfortable there so he left the town and moved to Dakor. Here he had darshan of the *murti* of Bhagwan Ranchhodrai. Pleased by Bodana's devotion and tired of the mechanical rituals performed by Brahmins, Ranchhodrai left Dwarika and came to Dakor.

Varni came from Dakor to Umreth on Sunday, 17 March 1799 (A.S. 1855,

Fagan *sud* 11). The town was inhabited by Khedawal Brahmins. It is said that Ranchhodrai himself drove the bullock cart and brought Bodana to Umreth. Since Bodana was asleep, Ranchhodrai stopped the cart, and woke him up. This happened on Tuesday, 18 October 1155 (V.S. 1212, Kartik *sud* 14). On the place where Ranchhodrai halted a small mandir was constructed. The mandir has the footprints of Ranchhodrai and so it is known as 'Shri Ranchhodrai Bhagwan na Pagla Mandir'.

Wish Fulfilled

Nilkanth came here and lodged on a platform outside the sanctum sanctorum of Jaagnath Mahadev mandir. Narbheram Dave and Rupram Thakar came to the mandir in the evening as per their usual routine. They removed their headgear, bowed to Shivji and said, "Hey Bholenath, if you are pleased then bless us with a meeting with God." At that time they heard strains of *stotras* sung in praise of Shiv.

The voice sounded divine and sweet to them. They investigated the source of the voice and soon found out that the *stotras* were being recited by a youth who was an embodiment of asceticism. His crown of hair resembled that of Shiv. They found kindness in his eyes. Renunciation oozed out of every pore of his body. They felt irresistibly drawn towards the young Brahmachari. They came and sat near Nilkanth.

After sitting silently for a while Narbheram asked, "Brahmachari! Where have you come from!" Varni replied, "Anirdesh." His brief reply puzzled them. Both of them had some knowledge of the geography of the country. But they had not heard of such a place called Anirdesh. They started racking their brains over it. "We cannot

figure out where it is," said Rupram.

"You will not be able to find it. When you come to know me well then you will realise where it is," Varni replied. "Brahmachariji, will you eat something?" Rupram asked. "I am observing a fast," he replied.

"Then I will get some fruits," said Narbheram. He brought some fruits and placed them before Nilkanth. Varni offered them to Vishnu, ate a little and gave the rest as consecrated food to the two Brahmins.

The next day Nilkanth left Umreth and reached Vartal via Bhalej. He sat on the parapet of a large pond. The tiny village with a lot of greenery gladdened Varni's heart. He felt like staying there. The sacred spot seemed to be beckoning him. He got up and went to Mahadevji's mandir on the opposite bank. He offered water to Shiv and came to a place full of trees, known as Hidimbavan in ancient times. He came to a dense Badri tree. He stood there for some time, then turned around and went to the bank of the pond and sat there.

Encounter with Joban Pagi

After some time Joban Pagi, a resident of Vartal, saw Nilkanth Varni from a distance. Joban was a notorious character in the region. He was a dacoit and a criminal. He was an expert in tracking down thieves by identifying them through their footprints.

Joban Pagi came near Nilkanth. He saw the evidence of austerities, good deeds and *brahmacharya* reflected in the young ascetic's character and personality. The hands that never shook while wielding bows and arrows, swords, and lancing others pitilessly began to shake. Joban bowed to Varni. When the young Brahmachari saw the expression on Joban Pagi's face, he smiled. The face of Joban had not known

what a kind expression was. Cruelty was writ large on it. He had not known what bhakti or love was. However, he prostrated before Varni.

Joban folded his hands and said, "Revered Lord, it seems that you have come from a far off place." Nilkanth merely nodded while smiling. Joban's lips were shaking while speaking. With a quaking voice he said, "Please stay here. I shall make arrangements for you to stay here."

Nilkanth gauged the sentiments of the criminal. He knew he meant every word he was saying. Joban's past good deeds had drawn Nilkanth to Vartal to redeem him. Varni said, "Not now. I shall come again and then I shall stay in your village."

Joban sat down and said again, "Maharaj! If you will eat I shall get food prepared at my place."

Nilkanth replied, "I shall myself come to your house and prepare the food." Joban Pagi felt happy and blessed. The omnipresent God lying dormant in his heart because of his ignorance was awakened through the presence of Nilkanth. Joban led Varni to his house.

Nilkanth came to Joban Pagi's house. Joban gave him provisions to cook. But Nilkanth prepared only *bati.* He offered it first to Thakorji, ate a little himself and gave the rest to Joban. He partook a little of it and the remainder he gave as *prasad* to his relatives who had come for Nilkanth's darshan.

At that time Joban Pagi's brother, Devkaran, felt in his heart that if Nilkanth came to his house he would be immensely satisfied. Varni perceived the thoughts of Devkaran and told Joban, "I shall go to his (Devkaran's) house and after taking some rest shall resume my pilgrimage."

On hearing these words there was an awakening in Devkaran's mind. He thought, "At this young age this ascetic knows what is passing in my mind." Varni

exercised an instant and electrifying influence in the house of Joban Pagi where kindness and good behaviour were unknown for all these years. At that time Joban was supremely reigning as a notorious dacoit. His influence was felt right up to Bengal. Joban's arrow would ensure the safety of the possessor. It served as a safe passage certificate. And if anyone disregarded his arrow then he would not see the light of day. Nilkanth stayed at Devkaran's place for the night and early next morning, he left for Bochasan.

Meeting Kashidas in Bochasan

Nilkanth arrived in Bochasan village and sat on its outskirts under a banyan tree on the banks of a large pond. He considered the village to be beautiful and prosperous. Different types of havelis showed the wealth of the place. The Charotar Patidars wearing *paghdis* or headgear peculiar to them were strutting about in the village. Varni thought there must be a special occasion. The village women started coming to the pond for bathing and fetching water. Seeing this the young Brahmachari at once got up and went to the Ramji mandir on the opposite bank. The sadhu of the mandir, Narsinhdas, welcomed Nilkanth.

Soon the Patidars came to hear of the magnetic personality of Varni. Veribhai minutely observed Nilkanth. He told the village head, Kandas Patel, about Varni's divine personality. On that day he had arranged a feast for Brahmins. Kandas sent his son, Kashidas, to the Ramji mandir to invite Varni to the feast.

When Kashidas reached the mandir, Nilkanth was meditating. He felt that for one so young the Brahmachari appeared to be a great sadhu. How could there be so much radiance from such a dry, emaciated body? He had so far not seen such divinity in a human being. Though he was a man with a tough heart he was

moved. The imagination of a farmer who strictly confined himself to earth and his bullocks could not go beyond that. But the good deeds of his previous lives were bearing fruit. He came near Nilkanth, offered a namaskar and sat before him.

For a long time Kashidas had anticipated that some great man would certainly visit the village. He had told Narsinhdas, the sadhu priest of the Ramji mandir, "If some great man comes to the mandir, please let me know." That good fortune came all of a sudden on that day itself.

But Narsinhdas did not have any insight in recognising a great personage. For him everyone wearing saffron clothes were ascetics; some fat, some lean, some smoking hookah and others taking ganja. He did not see anything special in Nilkanth Varni. When Narsinhdas saw Kashidas sitting before Nilkanth Varni, he said, "I saw the boy yesterday sitting under the banyan tree. On seeing the women filling their pitchers he left the place." On hearing this, Kashidas had a hearty laugh at the ignorance of Narsinhdas. The priest who had mechanically performed puja of the deities in the Ramji mandir could not exercise his imagination any further.

Kashidas joked, "Narsi, if your eyes can't see, then pull them out!" Then he continued, "He is no ordinary ascetic. Even though you have been worshipping Ramji for so long, you do not have the insight to recognise the true glory of this young Brahmachari." Narsinhdas kept quiet. Even though Kashidas was young in years, he had great influence. The priest knew it and joined his palms in acceptance. Soon, Nilkanth opened his eyes. He was elated. He had come to a region which was endowed with many good merits, which he had seen as a child in Chhapaiya. He was happy he had reached the soil from where he would launch his mission. He was also

happy that devotees who would be useful in his work had come in contact with him. Joban Pagi and Kashidas Patel were able souls for propagating the Bhagvat Dharma. Nilkanth looked at Kashidas once again. He touched Nilkanth's feet and appealed to him with folded hands, "Sadhuram! We have invited Brahmins to a feast. We would like you to join them, too."

Nilkanth Varni asked, "What sort of Brahmins are there in the feast?"

"Pure Brahmins," replied Kashidas. Varni felt relieved at the answer because he had come across many Brahmins who were fond of meat and liquor. He said, "I shall come with the priest."

Kashidas suddenly realised his mistake. In his eagerness to extend an invitation to Varni, he had altogether forgotten to invite Narsinhdas. He told the priest, "Narsi, you please also come with Varni." Kashidas realised that he was dealing with a highly cultured sadhu who knew social etiquette.

Narsinhdas accompanied Varni to the house of Kandas. They sat in the open verandah. Naniba, the mother of Kashidas, saw Nilkanth. She was a devout woman and immediately felt her spiritual merits awaken. She rose above the mundane consciousness. She felt as if she had been transported to an entirely different, divine world. After she regained consciousness of her surroundings she realised, "Instead of serving food to Nilkanth why am I still seated!"

Varni said in a low tone, "Mother! Get me laddus." Naniba went to the kitchen to fetch the laddus. The Brahmins there said, "We have not yet offered it to the goddess. You shall get them as soon as that is done."

Naniba was bewildered. She returned empty-handed. Seeing her, Nilkanth said, "I shall not take laddus. Get me some milk and rice."

Naniba thought that as the Brahmins refused laddus Nilkanth was asking for

milk. But there was not a drop of milk in the house. The buffaloes had gone for grazing in the village outskirts. Even so she came out of the house with a vessel. And, just at that time, her buffalo entered through the compound gate. She milked it and brought milk and rice for Nilkanth.

The priest was surprised at Varni's action in eating milk and rice when there were so many other delicious items to choose from. Nilkanth smiled at the priest's attitude. He felt that although the priest had renounced the world he had not given up his attachment to the palate! If one doesn't conquer taste then what sort of renunciation is that? The excessive desire for tasty foods is the root of all desires. In renouncing taste one subdues all other senses, whereas satisfying the desire for tasty foods also nourishes all the other senses. This was the condition of ascetics all over India. When they had not imbibed renunciation within themselves, then how could they make others give up mundane pleasures?

Nilkanth rinsed his mouth and got up. Naniba approached him with folded hands and said, "Brahmachari Maharaj! Please come for dinner here tomorrow. I wish to serve you laddus."

Varni replied with a smile, "Mother, I shall come again. I shall come several times to stay at your house. I like this village very much."

Naniba said, "Maharaj! Kashidas will receive you." Nilkanth caught hold of Kashidas' wrist and replied, "He is mine and shall remain so. And he will do a lot of service," saying this Varni placed his hand on Kashidas' head as a sign of blessing.

Naniba remarked, "Maharaj, may you always hold his wrist in this manner. Varni understood her feelings. He left for the Ramji mandir along with the priest.

SANCTIFIED MURTIS

In the evening Nilkanth performed the *arti* of Ram, Lakshman and Sita* in the Ramji Mandir.

(Foot note) These sanctified *murtis* were installed by Shastriji Maharaj in 1907 besides the *murtis* of Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj in Bochasan mandir. Their new names are Ichharam and Raghuvirji Maharaj.

After the *arti,* Nilkanth gazed steadily at the *murtis*. The priest did not understand the significance of Varni's action. He looked at the priest and smiled. Then he said, "These *murtis* are going to be installed in a splendid mandir that will come up here in future."

The priest who considered the mandir as a source of livelihood did not understand the meaning of Varni's statement. He had no interest in the prophecy and did not reply to Nilkanth who started chanting 'Ram Krishna Govind'. The villagers were pleased with Nilkanth's devotion. They told Varni, "Brahmachariji, why don't you stay here permanently!"

The priest felt a jolt and responded, "What will this boy do here? There is no need for him here."

Varni said, "I am not one who will stay in such a cramped space. A big abode will come up here for me."

The priest felt at ease on hearing this.

Next morning Nilkanth left Bochasan. At that time Naniba sent Kashidas to the Ramji mandir. Narsinhdas told him that the Brahmachari had left early in the morning. Kashidas was saddened to hear of Varni's departure. He at once returned home and conveyed the news to his mother who was waiting anxiously for him. When she saw her son coming alone she asked him, "Brahmachari is coming, isn't

he!" To this Kashidas replied with a sigh, "Mother, brahmachariji left early in the morning." The news came as a shock to her. All night till early morning she had been thinking about preparing different types of delicacies for Varni and serving him herself. She started weeping at the news of his departure. Her son reassured her, "Mother, don't cry. Wherever the Brahmachari is I shall find him and bring him here."

But Naniba lost patience. She said, "My son, my heart says the young ascetic has not gone. The priest may have told you a lie. Varni must have gone to the pond for a bath." With this thought she went with her son in search of Nilkanth to the pond on the outskirts of the village.

There was nobody there. They searched all around. They found footprints going towards the north. They were Nilkanth's. The 16 auspicious signs were visible in the footprints. Naniba was convinced that Varni was no ordinary individual. A man who has such auspicious signs on his soles has to be a divine being. She sighed, tears welled up in her eyes. Naniba started walking north following the footprints. Kashidas became perplexed on seeing the condition of his mother. He started walking behind her and they walked for quite a distance, until the footprints suddenly disappeared. Naniba immediately sat down. She had no strength left in her body to go any further.

Kashidas said, "Mother, have patience. Did not the Brahmachari tell you that he would return to this place? Did he not say he liked the place very much?"

"Son, these were promises of a great soul. He would say so to give us solace. But he cannot be tied down to anyone or anything." But something made Kashidas feel that Varni would return. He said confidently, "Mother, I am sure the young Brahmachari will return."

Then Naniba suddenly heard a voice. She looked all round but found nobody. She looked within and felt that someone was calling her, "Mother, do not worry. I shall come to Bochasan and stay there permanently."

Naniba realised that it was the Brahmachari's voice. She felt great peace and told her son, "Kashidas, let us go home. Brahmachari has said that he will return and will stay here."

Kashidas was happy on hearing this. He picked up the dust of the 16 auspicious footprint marks, tied it in a cloth and then they returned to their village.

* * *

Varni left Bochasan and came to Devan. He went straight to the *darbar* of King Bahadursinh. He approached the ruler as if he were a confirmed devotee, and before the king could say anything, Nilkanth asked him, "Who gave you this kingdom?"

Such a question from a stranger would have naturally irritated a Kshatriya. But Bahadursinh was indeed a genuine devotee. He stood up at once and said with folded hands, "Maharaj! I am enjoying the kingdom given by you."

Varni was happy at his understanding and instructed, "Then rule it properly and fear God so that you do not lapse morally. Rule over the people as if they are your sons. Follow dharma and inspire your subjects to follow dharma."

Bahadursinh was pleased with the discourse. He again said with folded hands, "I shall obey your commands fully."

As the ruler was a soul desirous of salvation, Varni gave him the knowledge of his divine identity. The knowledge of God's glory can be gained only if God himself gives it. When God lifts the veil of *maya* that envelopes *jivas* and grants them the

ability to recognise him then and then only are they able to recognise God. Bahadursinh was able to recognise the supreme being in Nilkanth and was immensely satisfied, experiencing a sense of fulfilment.

Nilkanth said with folded hands, "I shall stay here for one night and eat once."

He provided food to Varni with great devotion, then arranged a cot and mattress for him to sleep on. But the young Brahmachari was not interested in tasty foods or comfort. His interest lay only in discoursing on divine matters and to lead the souls away from worldly ties and bring them nearer to God.

The following morning Varni got up three hours before sunrise and left Devan. He took the road to Khambhat. On reaching Khambhat, he stayed at Haridas' Akhada (physical fitness school). In the morning he bathed in the Nareshvar Sarovar and performed his daily rituals in the school. Haridas had undertaken a vow not to beg for alms but to prepare from whatever people gave him. That day he did not get anything in alms so he had fasted. Nilkanth, too, went without food. He stayed there for the night and left for Nagra early next morning. There he had darshan of the *murti* of Brahma and left for Budhej on Thursday, 21 March 1799 (A.S. 1855, Fagan *sud* Punam).

KHODABHAI DARBAR OF BUDHEJ

At Budhej, he bathed in the local pond and completed his morning rituals. There he met a pious man. He was drawn towards Nilkanth. He had nothing with him except baked green wheatgrains. He gave the grains to Varni who offered them to Thakorji and ate some himself. Thus, after a two-day fast he got something to eat. He drew water from the well and drank it. He felt that the villagers were devout so he entered the village.

It was a fortunate day for Budhej. Varni arrived to bless its people. But they were busy from morning to evening either working as labourers, or attending to their fields or engaged in commerce. Everybody was paying attention to his own affairs and trying to make both ends meet. They had no idea about what was good for the well-being of their soul. They believed that the essence of spirituality lied in going to the outskirts of the village and feeding the cows with grass, offering water to the Shivling or just playing the gongs at the Ramji mandir in the evening *arti.* It was the height of ignorance. Nilkanth had undertaken his spiritual tours to lead people out of ignorance and bring light into their lives. He went straight to the *darbar* of Khodabhai Rathod. He was busy writing beneath the entrance gate. Varni called out to him but he did not look. Varni asked again, "Where does one get alms here?"

He continued writing and replied, "Maharaj, go to the house opposite. You will get alms." Nilkanth went there and chanted, "Narayan hare, Sachchidanand Prabho!" The maid servant was busy inside. She said, "Brahmachariji, wait a bit. Pace the opposite verandah. Once I am free, I shall come and give you alms."

Varni started pacing the verandah chanting, "Narayan, Narayan, Hari, Hari". Varni paced up and down the verandah seven times and then stood waiting for alms. Soon, the maid servant came and gave him jowar grains. Varni said, "What shall I do with this? If you give me provisions I can cook and eat."

The maid became slightly irritated. She said loudly, "O ascetic, if we start feeding everybody with provisions then we will become bankrupt. There are many like you who come here."

Varni smiled. He felt that everybody looked at all ascetics as being fakes. Rare are those who can see God in them. He said, "Mother! I am the only one of my class.

Others may be coming to your doorstep for alms, but I am different from them!"

The maid did not like to debate. She immediately responded, "Maharaj, others who come here are big and tall like buffaloes and are like uncontrolled bulls! They have frightening *tilaks* and *chandlos* on their forehead. They keep pincers and speak foul language. They fool the gullible people with superstitious threads and amulets. I don't see any difference in them and you. So if you want to take the jowar take it or else keep moving!"

Nilkanth felt that ascetics themselves have degraded their reputation. They do not have devotion, spiritual wisdom and neither do they practice renunciation. Engrossed in satisfying their sensuous pleasures the fake sadhus are a black spot for Indian religion and culture. They have forgotten their goal that they had left the world for attaining God. Satisfying their worldly appetite is their prime goal and for this they will get anything and everything from people by hook or crook. People run away on seeing such ascetics.

Nilkanth left the place. To grant the village chief and his people the opportunity for liberation he ate a few grains of jowar and then went to the outskirts of the village. He came to the well where he had drank water previously and sat there. There were pigeons sitting on the Shami tree before him. Varni looked at them and scattered the jowar grains he had obtained in alms. At once the pigeons came down, started eating the grains and gazed at Varni. Varni's compassionate eyes reflected his desire to liberate them because of his association.

Varni left the village and arrived at a farm. The farmer was drawing water from his well. When the bucket came up, he said, *"Ayo Ram."* Meaning Ram has come. Varni heard this and said, "Ram has indeed come. But if one recognises him, he will

be redeemed." Then Nilkanth placed his gourd and filled it with water.

* * *

Nilkanth left Budhej and went straight to Gorad. There is a large pond to the south of the village. There is also a pipal tree there. Varni rested under the tree. He liked rivers, ponds, trees and gardens very much. These creations of God for the refuge of man convey a message to exist in a peaceful and helpful manner. Before the philanthropy of trees man seems selfish and uncharitable.

Miracle to Bijal Koli

In a nearby farm Bijal Koli was operating a *kos*. Because of a drought the water level in the well had sunk to the bottom. The bullock was a mere skeleton. It was no better than a piece of timber, so lifeless it looked. Varni was observing all these things. He came to the farm. He was thirsty and thus came near the well. Bijal said, "Brahmachariji! The *kos* will just come up filled with water. Then you can drink from it."

Nilkanth replied, "I don't drink water drawn by a *kos*."

Bijal was greatly surprised and thought that the boy yogi was strange and different. He said, "Brahmachariji! The water in the well has sunk to 18 hands deep. The hard times has cast its shadow on land, rivers, ponds and wells alike."

Varni said, "The king is responsible for these hard times. Even those who are not sinners will also suffer."

Bijal felt that what Varni was saying was true. He came near Nilkanth and said with folded hands, "Maharaj! how will you drink water? I don't have a rope otherwise I would have drawn water for you."

Varni appreciated the farmer's desire to help and replied, "I don't need a rope to draw water." Saying this he came near and kept the gourd on the well and the water started rising automatically. Varni filled the gourd.

Bijal was watching the scene. He appealed humbly, "Maharaj! Let the water remain as it is."

Varni smiled. "Let the hard times do its work. The water rose in your well because Varun Dev personally came to serve me." Saying this Nilkanth left the place. Bijal tried to detain him but Varni was in hurry.

Bijal thought that if this great yogi stays in the village, he would do a lot of good. He ran to the village and informed the residents that a mahatma had come to his farm and the well-water came up by itself for him to drink. He suggested that they all should go and stop him from leaving the place. But only Shamji Patel, Prabhudas and Kshatriya Kandhoji accompanied him. The others thought that Varni must be just another one of those fake sadhus who wander the country. The three went in pursuit of Nilkanth but he had already gone far. They saw a shepherd coming from the opposite direction. They asked him, "Did you see anybody going this way?"

He said striking his staff on the ground, "Yes, an ascetic walking two hands above the ground. He was travelling at lightning speed. You will not be able to catch up with him." Hearing this all three were disappointed and turned back.

* * *

Varni had travelled too far. In the meantime he met Adesinh Darbar who was coming from the opposite direction. He became impressed with Varni and stopped him. "Brahmachari! Please come to the village. Stay here for today and sanctify our

village," he requested.

Nilkanth replied, "Brother! I am in a hurry. I have to go to Dholera. Please show me the way."

Adesinh realised that the Brahmachari would not stay. The Darbar was a king and he knew that it was not possible to change the decision of a yogi. So he guided him, "Maharaj, go from here to Runigam, then Vadgam, from there descend to the banks of the river Shikotar and you will reach Dholera. That is the straightest way."

Varni began to proceed as per the directions given by the Darbar.

Northward Journey

From Runigam, Varni came to Vadgam. Varni saw a pond and sat under a banyan tree by its banks. The pond was dry but a little distance away there was a well. At that time the village women had come to fill their pots with water. They saw the illustrious Varni sitting under the tree. Their hearts welled up with emotions. They forgot to draw water and instead continued staring at Varni.

Varni showed them his divine personality as they were *gopis* in their past births. With all these sentiments growing in their hearts the women became restless and ran towards Varni sitting under the tree with a sole desire to hug him! But then Varni suddenly disappeared! Disappointed, they started rolling in the dust where Varni had seated. As soon as the holy dust touched their bodies they became dispassionate. Lost in the thoughts of Varni they engaged themselves once again in their routine.

Nilkanth Varni then came to the pilgrim place of Dhanka by the Gulf of Cambay. There was a festival there which is celebrated only once in many years. A

large number of people had assembled for the occasion. Varni sanctified the pilgrim place and left. He was in search of sweet water. So he travelled towards the north and arrived at the Ramsar pond. He drew some water from a nearby well and offered it to Thakorji.

Then he went to the bank of the Shikotar river. When he was at a little distance from the bank Varni met Lakho Koli. Looking at his dress and the bag he was carrying, Varni asked, "Brother who are you? What are you carrying in the bag?"

Lakho was a simple, candid fellow. He saluted Nilkanth and said, "I am of the Koli community. The bag contains fish which I have caught."

On hearing this Varni felt compassion for the fish. He said slowly, "Brother, Kolis are supposed to be the best among the lower communities. There have been several great devotees in your clan." Saying this he pointed his finger at the bag and asked, "Why did you kill so many fish? When will you be free of this sin?"

The Koli's conscience was shaken by Nilkanth's words. His eyes became steady and his heart started to beat faster. Varni asked a question, "Won't God ask you why you have killed so many fish? You will die one day, even though you may make vain efforts to keep yourself alive. Then what right do you have in killing other living things?"

Varni's question aroused the conscience of the fisherman. He started shedding tears of repentance. He pleaded with folded hands, "Yogiraj! There is a terrible drought and woeful shortage of grain, so I am forced to catch fish to feed my family. I know that it is a sin, but I am helpless."

Varni was pleased by his honesty. He asked, "Don't the Brahmins and Baniyas

get grains? Do they die of hunger? If you decide to eat grains God will see to it that you get them too. No one will go hungry in your house."

Then Varni touched the bag containing the fish and they all came back to life. Nilkanth let them slip back into the water. Lakha's conscience became unburdened on seeing the miracle performed by Nilkanth. He took him to be the creator. Lakha saluted Varni and said, "Maharaj, today you have made me a true man. I had strayed from dharma." Varni was pleased with the sentiments expressed by the reformed Lakha. He said, "Lakha, a person may find someone to stop him from bad ways but it is difficult to find someone who can redeem him. Today is a lucky day for you."

Lakha experienced a sense of fulfilment. He appealed to Varni, "Spend the night at Vadgam. Dusk is fast approaching. The road ahead is difficult. At the confluence of the Sabarmati and the Mahi the water is very deep. It is not possible to cross it. In the bushes opposite lies the threat of tigers and leopards."

Varni was merely listening and Lakha was talking, "Maharaj, stay back. The route is full of difficulties."

Varni finally replied, "Lakha, the more difficult the route, the deeper the river, the greater the danger from tigers and leopards, the more determined I am to go. Wherever I set foot, fear vanishes from there."

There was great meaning in what Varni said but Lakha lacked the understanding to grasp it. He told the Koli, "Lakha, if you want to see come with me. I shall show you how I am going to cross the river." Saying this Varni took Lakha to the banks of the Shikotar river.

The sun had gone down. There was an eerie silence all around. Only the sound of the roaring river could be heard. And it was time for the high tide. So the conflu-

ence of the rivers became very dangerous to cross. It once again occurred to Lakha that Nilkanth should not be allowed to go. He said, "Maharaj! It is extremely difficult to cross this confluence. Even expert swimmers flinch when they see the swirling whirlpools. Don't go now. When the tide subsides tomorrow morning I will accompany you to Dholera by another safe route."

Varni immediately said, "The five elements of nature function by the wish of God. Even the tigers and leopards derive their strength from him. Therefore, what can these things do to those whom God protects?"

Lakha thought that Varni will not listen to him, so he said, "Maharaj! how would I know that you have reached the other bank?"

"When I wave with my deerskin rest assured that I have crossed," replied Nilkanth.

Lakha had developed an intense respect for Nilkanth who had revived dead fish and restrained him from killing again. And so he was concerned for Nilkanth.

Nilkanth blessed Lakha and approached the river at a brisk pace. Before Lakha could fix his eyes Nilkanth was walking on the river water. Lakha was amazed at this phenomenon. Even in the enveloping darkness he could see Varni's illustrious outline reach the opposite bank. Then he saw Varni waving the deerskin to signify the fact that he had made it to the opposite bank. Lakha returned home with mixed feelings. On the one hand he was happy that Varni had successfully crossed over, and on the other he was unhappy that he had left him. He returned with an empty feeling in his heart.

Lakha told everybody whom he met in the village about Varni's feats. He felt very happy whenever he narrated the episode. Kshatriya Jeebhai, Bhimjibhai and Barot Mulji were greatly surprised at what Lakha said. They experienced an inner

light. They felt that a great mahatma had passed by on the outskirts of their village. The news soon spread in the entire village. Those who were spiritually oriented were interested and happy, whereas the rest listened to it and paid no attention.

10. In Saurashtra

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Nilkanth passed through Pipdi and Ganf on his way to Dholera. He also visited Bhadiyad where he drank some milk and ate cooked wheat grains at the house of Govindram Vyas. From there he reached Dholera where he stayed at the Khodeshwar Mahadev mandir. Several devotees came to the place to have darshan of the young Brahmachari.

On seeing Varni, a Kshatriya devotee was emotionally moved. He wondered, "This lad from a far off place of tender age, resplendent personality and the emaciated body as a result of severe austerities, , why did he leave his parents!" He folded his hands in salutation and asked, "Brahmachariji! Will you come to the village?"

It is because of such devotees that Nilkanth visited villages. He accepted his invitation but said, "I shall come only to the village square."

The Kshatriya devotee was satisfied with this. He took Varni to the square, then went to his house and brought him something to eat. Varni ate and pleased the devotee.

After leaving Dholera, Nilkanth went to Gorasu where he stayed at the

mandir of Khodiyar Mata by the village pond. The mahant, Gosai Sevagar, was a spiritually inclined soul. He realised Varni to be of a unique type. He felt that the young Brahmachari was an embodiment of good character because he experienced purity in mind and senses in Varni's presence. The mahant gave him provisions. But Varni took only millet flour. He made *rotla* (thick bread) out of it and ate it with buttermilk. Nilkanth stayed there for the night. He was convinced that Sevagar was a seeker of moksha, so he delivered a discourse on moksha. Sevagar's conscience was awakened by Varni's words. Divine words of spiritual personalities never merge into air but penetrate deep into the heart and awaken one's soul.

Nilkanth's next stop was Vagad where he stayed at the house of Kumbhar Rana Bavloj. There Nilkanth slept in the dirt on the bare ground in his compound. The host tried his best to make his distinguished guest sleep on a mattress but in vain.

From there Nilkanth reached Bhimnath via Kharad and Jhinjhar. Varni bathed in the Lilka river and went for darshan of Bhimnath Mahadev. He took a little from what was offered in the mandir.

He visited Polarpur where a dinner was arranged as part of the rites following the death of Kanbi Jetha Banani's mother. On seeing the Brahmachari he felt that if he fed him then his mother's soul would rest in peace. So he brought *sukhdi* and offered it to Varni. Nilkanth took the *sukhdi* to the bank of the pond. He drew water from a nearby well and then offered *sukhdi* and water to Thakorji. Then he took the *prasad*. He drank water from his gourd and poured the remaining back into the well, sanctifying the water.

Varni took the route to Vallbhipur. He passed through Barvala. There is a small mandir on the riverbed. He spent the night there. He got up early in the morning

and took the road to Vallbhipur. Varni stayed here briefly.

Varni came to Sihor. He went to bathe in the Brahmakund but on seeing a number of women there he left the place and went to Gautam Kund in the south. He bathed and completed his daily rituals there. Then he went for darshan of Gautameshwar Mahadev. The mandir priest realised the spiritual eminence of Varni and invited him to take food with them. He stayed there for a night and left for Bhavnagar the next morning.

In Bhavnagar he stayed at Devji Bhakta's dharmashala. The mahant offered him food and water. Seeing his piety, Nilkanth preached to him. The mahant became very happy and said, "Brahmachari, if you stay here I shall make you the head."

Nilkanth politely declined the offer and left the place after spending three nights there.

Nilkanth next went to Naklank Mahadev at Koliak near the sea. It was the pilgrimage season and the devout were assembling for a celebration. Some pilgrims offered their respects to Varni, some gave food and some served in other ways. Thus the divinity of Nilkanth drew true spiritual seekers towards him. And by serving Nilkanth their good merits of the past were awakened..

Varni Blesses a Pious Man

Varni resumed his pilgrimage and reached the village of Kukkad. He walked through the village and happened to pass by the gate of Darbar Bhagwansinhji's house. Bhagwansinhji and his assistant Khoja Jiva Thakkar were there. Varni stood there for some time. When the Darbar saw him he considered him to be a mendicant and asked in jest, "Where do you come from? What's your name? And what's your caste?"

Nilkanth boldly replied to all these questions, "My native is Anirdesh, caste Brahma and names countless. Even I cannot recall all my names." After saying this, he left the place.

The Darbar did not understand what Varni said. But his assistant was clever and sharp. He immediately realised that the ascetic was a great personality, otherwise he would not speak in such an esoteric way. He told his master, "Bapu, he seems to be a great yogi, otherwise he would not have spoken in that manner. We have made a mistake by not serving him."

The Darbar was a good soul, but because of his friendship with a local singer his heart was contaminated. However, he had regard for his assistant, so he told him, "Jiva, what you say may be true! We have made a mistake. The Brahmachari could not have gone far. Let us request him to come back." Both of them set out to look for Varni.

Nilkanth was meditating by the river bank under the shade of a mango tree. When the Darbar touched him Varni opened his eyes. Both Bhagwansinh and Jiva sat before him with folded hands. The Darbar said, "Jogi! You had just come to our place. It was not proper to have allowed you to leave without any food. Your words were such that I could not grasp the meaning of what you were saying. Please come to my house and accept some food."

Varni knew that Bhagwansinh was a pious man. It was to awaken his conscience that he had come to the place. Jiva Thakkar was also a man endowed with purity. That was why he was able to understand the glory of Varni.

Varni said, "Darbar, bring the provisions here. I shall prepare the food and eat here."

The Darbar called for provisions at once. Varni cooked the food. He offered it to

Thakorji, ate a little himself and gave the rest to the Darbar and his assistants. They ate the *prasad* with great devotion. Their mind became pure and they felt inner peace. Bhagwansinh said, "Please sanctify my *darbar*."

"Not now, I shall come later," replied Nilkanth and got up.

Bhagwansinh and Jiva Thakkar returned to their village.

Nilkanth left Kukkad and came to Dihor. Wherever he went it was because of some devoted soul. At Kukkad he redeemed King Bhagwansinh. At Dihor Varni had Mulji Bhavsar in mind. Mulji was of tender years and his mother was very devout. Mulji had inherited her virtues.

Varni came to the Ramji mandir square in the middle of the village. When the villagefolk saw the young yogi they started assembling before him. Varni was absorbed in meditation, seated on a deerskin, as was his practice. Normally, the village square was a squatting place for wayward ascetics. So the local folks thought that Varni too was one of them. When Varni came out of meditation people enjoyed talking to him. Nilkanth Varni spoke on the fleeting nature of worldly things and emphasised the need to offer devotion to God. They all listened to what Varni said and went their ways. Nobody asked Varni about what he would like for lunch.

Exactly opposite to the square was Mulji's shop. His mother had Varni's darshan. She continued looking at him. Then she told her son, Mulji, "Son, go to the square. A yogi has come. Have his darshan and invite him home for lunch."

Although a child, Mulji was mature and calm. He immediately went to the square. He prostrated before Varni. Then Mulji went near. Varni placed his hand on his head. Mulji asked, "Maharaj! Shall I get you something to eat?"

Nilkanth Varni smiled and nodded. Mulji brought some provisions. His mother

went to the river, cleaned a pot and filled it with filtered water. Mulji brought that water to Varni. Varni cooked food, offered it to Thakorji and took a little. The rest he gave to Mulji as *prasad.* Both Mulji and his mother ate the consecrated food and felt blessed.

The consecrated food inspired a high level of bhakti in Mulji. After he grew up he used to go to Gadhpur for Maharaj's darshan. On seeing him Maharaj used to say, "He is a pious soul from Akshardham."

A Matchless Yogi

Nilkanth left Dihor and travelled straight to Lakdiya. Here, Premji Thakkar, a Khoja, was sitting at the door of his shop in the bazaar. Varni came there with a smile on his face. Premji saw him and stood up. He had a beautiful mat made of grass, but he had never used it. If anybody asked him, "Premji! If you are not using this mat then why don't you give it to a yogi!" With a smile Premji would reply, "When I come across a proper sadhu I shall certainly offer it to him."

Today, Nilkanth came and stood before him and said, "Premji! Search the whole universe! You will not find such a yogi!"

Premji was surprised that an unknown ascetic called him by his name. He went to fetch the mat to offer it to Varni. But by then Nilkanth had left towards Nana Gopnath. There he offered water to Shivji and proceeded to Piparla village.

At Piparla, a Brahmin was feeding pilgrims. When he saw Nilkanth, he at once realised that Varni was a stranger to the place. From his physical appearance the Brahmin felt that the ascetic has been on a long, arduous pilgrimage.

Except for his *kamandal* and alms bowl, Varni did not have any possessions. So the Brahmin thought that the young Brahmachari was non-acquisitive. The

Brahmin's discerning intellect made him see in Varni the austerities of Shivji and the worldly detachment of Kartikeya. He at once came near Varni. Nilkanth smiled when he saw the Brahmin. The *tripundra* on his forehead, *rudrakshmala* around his neck and the *yagnopavit* on his body made Nilkanth feel that the Brahmin was a true Shiv devotee and very pious in nature. Varni said to the Brahmin, "Maharaj! Will you give me some food?"

The Brahmin liked the sweetness in the tone. He thought about the wayward sadhus who moved about in packs demanding alms in a loud voice, and if there was any delay in getting food or whatever they wanted, they used abusive language, brandished their *trishuls* and pincers and made threatening gestures to draw blood if anyone resisted their demands. Whereas in the case of Varni, his entire body and face were radiating a glow. There was sweetness in his voice, kindness in his eyes and humility in his words.

The Brahmin thought that so far he had provided food to many ascetics. Out of them someone may have been a pious soul and as a result of that merit today Shiv himself had come to him. He folded his hands and said, "Maharaj! Please come to my house."

Nilkanth followed the Shiv devotee to his house. He offered him a nice seat. Then he went inside the house and told his wife, "Today we have been blessed. A great soul, who can redeem us, has come to our house. You prepare *rotla* and serve it with abundant ghee and gur. We will never be blessed with such an opportunity!"

The Brahmin's wife had darshan of the Brahmachari. At once she had his image imprinted on her mind. She prepared the *rotla* and put ghee and gur in them. Then the Brahmin called Varni for the meal.

The Brahmachari washed his hands and feet and took his seat. The Brahmin offered him a low table. Nilkanth placed the Shaligram on it. He took the *rotla* from the plate and offered them to Thakorji. He then put them in his begging bowl, poured some water and took a morsel. The Brahmin and his wife were sitting opposite and watching the proceedings. When Varni placed the first morsel in his mouth, the Brahmin and his wife saw the entire universe in his mouth. They also saw Kailash and Vaikunth. Both of them were delighted by this divine darshan. The couple was very much delighted as they realised that God himself had come down as Varni.

Varni averted his gaze and ate a little. He then rinsed his mouth. The Brahmin humbly replied, "Brahmachari Maharaj! You have been kind enough to visit our house. Please stay for at least two months. I shall serve you as per my capacity. Today our good fortune has blossomed. We have been blessed."

Nilkanth recognised the noble qualities in the Brahmin and stayed with him for two days instead. After satisfying him, Varni left the place and went to Talaja. Here he bathed in the Shetrunji river and entered the village and stayed by the local mandir after seeking the mahant's permission. A devout merchant came there. When he had Nilkanth's darshan he was inspired to offer him food. He went home and brought provisions for Varni. The young Brahmachari cooked a meal. He offered it to Thakorji, ate some himself and gave the remaining *prasad* to the merchant. Because of his good act the merchant begot a son, whom he named, Gagabhai.

At Gopnath Mahadev

Nilkanth next came to Mota Gopnath. He stayed at the Shivji mandir called

Gopnath Mahadev. The mahant, Nrusinhanand Brahmachari, was a devout person. He looked at Nilkanth from head to toe and was greatly impressed by his spiritual qualities. The mahant courteously appealed to Varni, "Maharaj! This is a place of pilgrimage. In such a holy place one should stay for five nights."

That was also the intention of Nilkanth. The mahant called a Brahmin to prepare food and served Varni. Next day Varni went to the sea for a bath. He also bathed in the salty water and sweet water springs. The mahant experienced bliss in the presence of Varni. He felt that his soul had been awakened with the arrival of Nilkanth.

On the third day, after bathing, Nilkanth was returning to Gopnath Mahadev. A young woman was coming from the opposite direction. She stood still on seeing Varni who was walking rapidly with his eyes to the ground. She felt that Varni was going away from her and she was just standing doing nothing! She did not understand what to do. But suddenly the words came out from her mouth, "Oh Maharaj! Please wait."

Hearing these words Varni stopped. On finding that Varni had stopped the woman ran towards him. He signalled with his hand, "Sister, I am waiting. Please come slowly." In a short time she came to where Varni was standing. But she was confused. What to say? What to speak?

Before she could say anything Varni asked her, "What are you carrying in that little pot?"

"Milk, Maharaj! Cow's milk. Please drink it." She handed it over to Varni.

He took the pot, filtered the milk into his *kamandal* and drank it. Then Nilkanth asked, "Sister, who are you?"

She replied, "Maharaj! I stay at Pithalpur near Uchadi. I belong to the Khoja

community and my name is Janbai. It is my daily practice to bring cow's milk to the Gopnath mandir. In case I meet someone on the way I give the milk to that person. If I don't find anybody on the way, I offer the milk to Gopnath Mahadev."

Nilkanth smiled and replied, "Janbai! Today Mahadev has accepted your milk."

Being a simple soul Janbai could not grasp the meaning of Nilkanth's statement. But a wave of happiness swept over her and she experienced bliss. Varni cast a glance at her and started to leave. Janbai saw Varni going and continued looking at him till he was out of sight. She did not understand why she stood rooted to the spot! She experienced a unique happiness and then started for Pithalpur.

Even after reaching home Nilkanth's *murti* remained fixed in Janbai's heart. She recalled him signalling to her, pouring and straining milk in his *kamandal*, or speaking to her in a sweet voice after drinking the milk. She had never heard such sweet speech before.

Divine Praise

At night Varni gave her darshan. She got up with a start. "Who's this?" She wondered. When she fixed her gaze she saw the resplendent form of the young Brahmachari. She saw a host of deities praying to Nilkanth. She also witnessed countless prophets praying to Varni. She became totally oblivious of her surroundings. Pithalpur, her house and other things had vanished from her mind. Then she heard the mysterious voice of Varni, "Janbai! After three years I shall come back. At that time you send your son in the north-westerly direction."

The voice echoed once again, "Janbai! I shall come back. Send your son in the north-westerly direction." Then Nilkanth disappeared.

Janbai regained consciousness. It was hard for her to understand whether she had had a dream or whether it a reality? If it was a dream then she should be sleeping on her bed. But she was sitting. She felt that Varni must be Gopnath Mahadev. Varni had said, "Mahadev has accepted your milk." Her joy knew no bounds.

Varni stayed at Gopnath for five nights and set out for Jhanjmer. There he stayed at a Brahmin's house. The Brahmin felt fortunate at the choice to offer his services to the Brahmachari. During his travels Nilkanth Varni went wherever he found devout people. Whosoever offered whatsoever, Varni accepted gladly. And in return he gifted them with Akshardham! After pleasing the pious Brahmin devotee at Jhanjmer by accepting his hospitality, Varni left for Kalsar.

Here, Nilkanth exposed the fake devotees. Nobody offered him alms there. Not only that, but they did not allow him to stay in the village. He spent the night in a farm. During his travels, both good and evil men came across his path. Those who were pious recognised him as God and those who were evil obstructed and opposed him.

After Kalsar, Nilkanth came to Katpar on his way to Mahuva. He was delighted to see the Malan river, known for its sanctity, touching both banks. He bathed in the river. Meanwhile, Pitambar Sheth arrived with a cart filled with household requirements. The Sheth saw Nilkanth, sitting in *padmasan*. His eyes were fixed on the tip of his nose. When the Sheth saw the glow that radiated from the emaciated body, he stopped his cart. Pitambar got down and approached Varni. He touched his lotus feet. Varni realised his devotion and graced him with his glance. Pitambar Sheth was blessed! He asked Nilkanth with folded hands, "Maharaj! Will you accept a gift?"

Varni showed his willingness with a gesture. The Sheth went back to his cart and returned with dried coconut and sugar for Varni. The young Brahmachari offered it to the Shaligram, ate only a little and gave the rest as *prasad* to the Sheth. Varni then asked, "Sheth! Where do you stay?"

"Maharaj! My house is in Mahuva but for trade and commerce I go to the neighbouring village of Kalsar."

Varni smiled and advised, "Sheth! What can you earn by doing business in such an evil place where people do not have good conduct, dharma and faith. If you earn money in such a place it is branded as the devil's wealth. With such wealth you will not be happy."

Pitambar Sheth pondered for a while. He realised that even after many years of business he still had not been able to earn enough. And he did not feel peace at heart. He said with humility, "Maharaj! What shall I do?"

"Carry on your trade in Mahuva. You will be happy and be able to offer bhakti."

Pitambar Sheth followed Varni's command and turned the cart back there and then.

Pitambar Sheth, who followed Varni's command, saw his business flourish in Mahuva. Continual remembrance of Varni filled his heart with devotion. He had three sons: Narsinh, Damji and Jethabhai. All three became ardent devotees of Bhagwan Swaminarayan.

In Mahuva

Varni came to Mahuva and went to the Lakshmi-Narayan mandir in the centre of the village. He sat on the mandir stairs. At that time the mahant, Balakdas, was reading aloud from the Ramayan. When Varni asked a question, the mahant resented

the intrusion and told Varni, "Mind your own business."

The young Brahmachari left the place and went to a platform under a tamarind tree. There is a shrine of Hanumanji nearby. He sat near it.

Balakdas developed a liking for Nilkanth because of his gentle face and young age. He soon realised that whatever the Brahmachari did was full of bhakti. Nilkanth did not ask for anything. Balakdas saw great detachment in Nilkanth's conduct. His steadfast vision proclaimed his mastery over his senses and mind. Balakdas sent provisions to Nilkanth.

Next day a woman of the Baniya caste gave him *rotlo* and ghee. On the third day the provisions came from Fulvan Bawa. Nilkanth stayed at Mahuva for three days. For two days Nilkanth bathed at the Talgajarda Ghat, known as 'Bawano Kotho', on the bank of the river Malan. He also performed yogic exercises there. Thus he sanctified the Malan river and made Mahuva a holy place.

Nilkanth left Mahuva and came to the village of Doliya. Here he accepted the hospitality of a Brahmin called Vitthal, who received him with courtesy. Varni blessed him for his loving service.

From Doliya he went to Rajpatva village. On the eastern side of the pond he sat under a banyan tree. After sitting there for some time, he left for Chanchva. To the east there is a pond. And on the eastern side of the pond is a tree. He sat in its shade and sanctified it.

His next stopover was at Dungar village. From there the young Brahmachari came to Pipa Bhakta's place in Pipavav. He got provisions at once! After cooking food Nilkanth offered it to the Shaligram. He ate a little and then rested for sometime. Thereafter, he left for the village of Vavera. At Vavera he stayed on the terrace of the Shiv mandir for two nights.

He then came to Vadgam via Rajula and spent a night there.

Varni's next halt was at Rampara. On the eastern side there is a Sami tree. Varni sat under it. The Sami tree did not yield any fruits or flowers nor cast any shadow. Nilkanth was moved by the wretched condition of the tree. He decided to redeem it. Nilkanth sanctified the tree with his divine touch.

To redeem all, irrespective of their caste and creed, was Nilkanth's sole objective during his maiden tour in this universe. No one can attain the God-realised state of his own. So, Nilkanth had manifested on this earth to grant his divine abode, Akshardham, to every living and non-living being that came in contact with him.

Nilkanth walked towards the west. There he bathed in the stream called Udhmatiya. Passing through the village he saw a Shiv mandir near the Dhatarvadi river. He stopped there and cast his divine glance in all the four directions.

At a distance was a memorial place where the last rites of Atmanand Swami, the guru of Ramanand Swami, had been performed. Varni stood there for some time. As Varni had not yet met his guru, Ramanand Swami, it is obvious that Varni could not have known Atmanand Swami. But then nothing is hidden from the all knower. At the time of his death Atmanand Swami had instructed his disciples to remain under the guidance of Ramanand Swami. In this way the roots of his own activity of ultimate redemption were sown by Atmanand Swami. Keeping this favour of Atmanand Swami in mind, Varni went to his memorial shrine to offer his respects.

Rampara is a little known village in the corner of the Babariyavad region of Saurashtra. Many such places were in his itinerary.

After crossing the river Dhatarvadi, Nilkanth entered Kovaiyya. There is an Adi

Varah mandir on the seashore. After having darshan he halted at the mandir for a night.

Early in the morning he left and came to Gangad village. Here he stayed under a banyan tree. He drew water from a nearby well and drank it. Then he came to Samtej. After bathing in Shyamkund and completing his rituals, he arrived at Shimar.

In Shimar

He bathed in the Suryakund which was in the south of Shimar village and stayed at the adjoining hospice for the night. A greedy merchant had Nilkanth's darshan early in the morning. When he saw the young Brahmachari he decided to fulfil his own greed. He thought, "If I please the Brahmachari by offering him a meal then I will be redeemed of my poverty." Thinking thus he approached Varni with folded hands and invited him to his house. Nothing was hidden from Varni. He knew the reason behind the merchant's hospitality. But he wished to redeem the merchant, so he accepted his invitation.

The merchant prepared a good meal and served it to Nilkanth. He was driven by a selfish motive. As was his practice, Varni offered it to Thakorji, ate a little and gave the rest to the greedy merchant. After completing his meal, the young Brahmachari left to go to the dharmashala. The merchant did not like this. Out of greed he thought all sadhus and ascetics lacked courtesy. He had a strong desire for some rewards from Varni. So, he decided not let Varni go away easily.

He sat at the entrance of the dharmashala till early morning, expecting the young Brahmachari to come out. As he had surmised, Nilkanth came out to resume

his journey. The greedy merchant followed him. When Nilkanth saw this, he said, "Now you may turn back. You have served me well."

The merchant was frank enough to admit, "Maharaj! I had served you so with the wish of getting something in return. I have a strong desire for money. Therefore give me lots of money."

Nilkanth blessed him, "You will get enough money to maintain yourself."

Varni wanted to end the discussion but the merchant would not give up easily. He took a deep breath and said with folded hands, "I want to create a 'Golden Lanka' in my house."

Nilkanth had a hearty laugh for his inferior demand and said. "Lanka was of gold and so that was why Hanumanji burnt it. You have served me well so I am giving you my supreme Akshardham."

The greedy merchant did not understand what Nilkanth said. He thought that his meal had been wasted on the Brahmachari. The merchant considered Varni to be a stone-hearted ascetic. As Varni wanted to cleanse him of greed, he had to become stone-hearted. Having blessed the greedy merchant, Nilkanth left the place. The disappointed merchant returned home.

Varni was travelling at a fast pace to transform the worldly desires from the hearts of as many people as possible.

Preaching in Guptaprayag

Varni went straight from Shimar to Tulsishyam. The next stop was Guptaprayag. There is an ancient Nrusinh mandir here. Nearby lies the mandir of Sheshashayi Baldev. The holy seat of Vallabhacharya is situated here. Here, too, lies the confluence of the three great rivers, namely, Ganga, Yamuna and Sarasvati. There

are natural springs dedicated to Brahma, Vishnu and Shiv. Varni saw a stone block under a rayan tree to the north of the springs and sat there. The devotees who came there for bathing would come to him as they were highly impressed by his resplendent personality. Varni started preaching to them.

During his stay here, Nilkanth went to the house of Bhana Pathak, a Nagar of Vadnagar, for his meals. Pathakji was greatly attracted by Varni's personality. Nilkanth's preachings made a lasting impact on his mind. He realised that he was face to face with an extraordinary ascetic. One day, out of curiosity, Pathak asked Nilkanth, "Brahmachariji! What's your name?"

Varni smiled at the question, "All this time you have entertained me and fed me. Now you are asking my name? You should have known me before associating with me."

But Pathak was no simpleton. He replied, "Maharaj! My inner eye has recognised you. But in future if somebody asks me whom did you serve? What answer shall I give?"

On hearing this Varni's eyes gazed into the future. "Very few people would know me as Nilkanth," he thought. So he revealed, "My name is Sahajanand! That is how people will know me in future." Pathak was immensely pleased by simply hearing the name!

At the Sheshashayi mandir, the mahant, Nrusinhanand, used to give him food and Varni on his part would talk about yoga. It was a beautiful place of pilgrimage. But on seeing the water in the pond, the mahant said, "Brahmachariji! The place is beautiful but in summer the water-level sinks deep down in the ground. In the summer months the torrid heat bakes the sand and pebbles."

Varni realised that without water pilgrims would find it extremely difficult to

stay here. He said, "Mahantji! hereafter there shall be plenty of water even during summer."

Varni stayed there for one-and-a-half-months. Then he left for Una.

To the west of Una there was a stepwell. Varni bathed in the well. Here, Hansraj Sheth and Ganesh Sheth served him with great devotion. When Varni realised that the people of the village had great faith in God, he revealed his divine qualities. Some saw him in his cosmic form, some saw him as the four-armed Vishnu while others saw him as Krishna.

The young Brahmachari stayed at Una for three days. On the fourth day, he left the place early in the morning. When the local people learnt that Varni had left they became very unhappy. Many tried to find him, but failed.

Varni reached Dolaha village. He stayed at a cowherd's settlement. With great devotion the cowherd gave him provisions to cook food, but Nilkanth did not accept it and asked for only milk.

At night the guru of the cowherds arrived. Varni participated in singing bhajans along with him. The whole settlement echoed to the sound of *manjira* and *mridang*. People slept late that night. Bawaji (the guru) and Nilkanth were sleeping side by side. Whenever the Bawaji tossed in bed he would say 'O Ram!' in a most natural way. And Varni responded by acknowledging with a short 'H..m..' When the guru heard this four or five times he sat up in bed and said, "You are answering my call, so are you Ram?"

Varni smiled at the query and said, "Only one who is Ram will respond!" Then the Bawaji saw in Nilkanth the *murti* of Ram carrying a bow and arrow. Bawaji was a pious soul, so he became convinced of Varni's divinity.

Lakhu Charan of Lodhva

Early next day Varni got up and went to Lodhva where he stayed at Lakhu Charan's place. Lakhu Charan was Atmanand Swami's disciple. She had great faith in the Advait philosophy propounded by her guru. Ramanand Swami was also Atmanand Swami's disciple. But Ramanand Swami did not agree with Atmanand Swami's teachings that God is formless. So he left him and went to Shrirangakshetra. While at Shrirangakshetra Ramanujacharya appeared to Ramanand Swami in a dream, initiated him into the sadhu-order and ordered him to go to a suitable place and spread Bhagvat Dharma.

Then Ramanand Swami came to Sorath in Gujarat, and started his mission. When Atmanand Swami realised that his end was near, he sent for Ramanand Swami. He realised that Ramanand Swami is a true sadguru, so he asked all his disciples to accept Ramanand Swami as their guru. Everyone agreed to this. Only Lakhu Charan refused to accept Ramanand Swami as her guru. Ramanand Swami tried to convince Lakhu to renounce her philosophy but he did not succeed. Finally, Ramanand Swami excommunicated her from the fellowship.

Austerity and spiritual wisdom had made Lakhu a highly developed soul. When she saw Nilkanth she realised instantly that she was in the presence of a yogi with a calibre like that of Sanakadik. That was why she served him lovingly at her own house. Atmanand Swami's disciples, Vitthal, a Brahmin, and his son had both taken *diksha.* They were in service of Lakhu as Vitthalanand and Balanand under instructions from Atmanand Swami.

Vitthalanand would prepare food and serve it to Varni every day. Lakhu would milk the buffaloes, separate the cream from the milk, mix it with sugar and offer it to Nilkanth.

Lakhu Charan Asks for a Boon

Varni would expound the greatness of Vishishtadvait philosophy and point out the inadequacies of Advait philosophy. Lakhu gradually veered round to Vishishtadvait faith and gave up Advait philosophy due to Nilkanth's persuasion. She started believing that God has a form and Varni was none other than the supreme being himself who had come to stay at her house.

Varni's mission here was over. He had stayed at her place for three months. Varni asked for her leave. He said to Lakhu, "You have served me very well. So I wish to grant you a boon."

Lakhu said, "Maharaj! If you are really pleased, then grant eternity to my son, Viro, and my buffaloes."

Varni smiled at the strange request. He told her to ask once again but Lakhu asked for the same boon. Varni said, "Lakhu! In your Advait philosophy everything is believed to be false and temporary. Then are Viro and the buffaloes not temporary?"

Lakhu began to think after this query. Spiritual knowledge remains mere words if it is not imbibed in life. By indulging in mere debates learned scholars create factions and conflicts. Lakhu humbly requested Varni, "Maharaj! You have dissolved my ego! Please grant me moksha."

Varni granted her ultimate salvation and from there he went to Prabhas Patan where Shri Krishna gave up his physical form.

Varni spent three nights at Prabhas Patan. Everyday he bathed at the confluence of the rivers, Hiran, Saraswati and Madhuvanti. Then he would go to the almshouse by the seashore and eat whatever he got in alms.

He then proceeded towards the east. He came to the pond, Bhalka, where

Bhagwan Krishna had renounced his human body.

Nilkanth slept under the same tree keeping his right leg over his left leg. A Brahmin came there for darshan of the memorial place. He was surprised to see a reclining figure under the tree, postured in the same manner as Shri Krishna. When he was about to wake him up, his eyes fell on Varni's right sole. On his rose-coloured sole the Brahmin saw the nine divine signs: the octagonal mark, *urdhvarekha,* swastik, berry, corn, thunderbolt, goad, the flag and the lotus. He had darshan of Krishna in a yellow, silky *pitambar,* a sky blue upper cloth and a crown on the head. He rubbed his eyes. The Brahmin had the same darshan again. Once again he rubbed his eyes. Meanwhile, Varni got up. He proclaimed loudly as if to wake up the Brahmin, "Wake up! If you wake up you'll see God in front of you."

The Brahmin looked at Varni and understood the meaning of what he said. He appealed to Nilkanth with folded hands, "Maharaj! today, you have fulfilled my wish!"

Varni replied, "I have manifested myself to fulfil the desires of infinite souls. In future I shall be known as Nyalkaran (fulfiller of desires)."

The Brahmin realised the truth. Now he needed to reinforce it in his heart. Varni left the place.

Nilkanth went to Patan from there. After staying there for a short while, he came to Bhanduriya via Veraval. He stayed in Bhanduriya at a blacksmith's house. The blacksmith served the young Brahmachari with devotion. He travelled to Malia and Shergadh. Here he stayed at the village square for a night. In the morning he left the place and came to Junagadh.

Varni saw the Raivatachal mountain (Mt. Girnar). He was aware of the rigorous

austerities of the mountain, so he came near the mountain to sanctify it.

Enchanting Ecstasy

Nilkanth came near Damodarkund and bathed in it. He also bathed in the Revatikund. It was drizzling in the evening. It was August 1800 (Shravan of A.S. 1856). Nilkanth went for darshan of Lord Damodarji at the Damodar mandir. When the priest saw Varni's concentration while having darshan, his reverence for him grew. He was patiently waiting for Nilkanth to open his eyes after offering prayers. He opened his eyes soon and the priest saw tears in his eyes. He came near Varni and joined his palms in salutation, "Brahmachari! Where are you staying?"

"God has given this entire open space," he replied with dignity.

But the priest would not leave Varni so easily. He said once again, "Brahmachariji! You appear to be an outsider. This is a mountainous region. It is full of tigers, leopards, lions and man-eating people known as *aghoris*. Even the valiant and brave develop cold feet here. If you have nowhere else to go, please stay with me."

These words had no impact on Varni. He said, "Tonight I am gong to stay in the forest. If a man is pious he can instil piety even in beasts." Saying this he left the place.

Varni came to the place where King Muchkund had had darshan of Bhagwan Krishna. He halted there briefly. He walked westwards and decided to spend the night at a dilapidated shrine. Nilkanth spread his deerskin and sat in meditation. Slowly the night advanced, crickets began to rasp. Sometimes the roar of a lion could be heard. Even the rocks of Mt. Girnar trembled to the roar. The wild animals would

sniff in the direction of the shrine and go their way. They would not enter inside. Beasts who normally became wild on smelling humans could not smell a human today inside the shrine! The vibes from Nilkanth's divine personality dissolved the brute feelings in the animals.

Meek as a Pet

Meanwhile a lion came and sat before Varni. Slowly the day broke and people began to stir about. They learnt that a young ascetic was sitting in the ruined shrine, and a powerful lion was sitting before him. They tried to alert him to the danger by shouting from a distance and from treetops. Varni opened his eyes, looked at the lion and signalled to him to leave. The lion stood up immediately, circumambulated him to offer respect and disappeared into the bushes! The priest of the Damodar mandir saw the miracle. He felt that even the wild animals reciprocated the piousness present in Varni. A violent animal became non-violent in his presence!

Slowly, he came near Varni. Varni smiled at the priest, who in turn touched his feet. He said with folded hands, "Oh merciful one! You are a personification of purity. I have seen it with my own eyes. If you will kindly come to the mandir I shall have the good fortune of serving you."

Nilkanth was convinced that the priest's sentiments were sincere and agreed to go to the Damodar mandir with him. He stayed at the mandir for three nights. The priest served the young Brahmachari with the same devotion as he worshipped the *murti* of Damodarji. Varni was greatly pleased with his services and rewarded the priest by appearing to him as Lord Damodar. The priest was elated and felt fulfilled.

Full of Devotion

Varni's next stop was Bhavesvar. From there he reached the valley of Girnar. He came to the stepwell known as Chadan ni Vav. He drank water and glanced benignly at Raivatachal (Mt. Girnar). To sanctify it, he started climbing it.

That auspicious day was Saturday, 10 August 1799 (A.S. 1856, Shravan *sud* 10). The pathways on the mountain were rough. Varni's feet were soft. The trees and flowering plants on the mountain began to strew flowers along Nilkanth's path. Varni was pleased with their services. The entire forest wealth of Raivatachal was saturated with devotion.

Nilkanth went up to the peak. He wished to bathe in the Gaumukhi Ganga but the ascetics staying there did not allow him to do so. He asked them, "This entire holy place is for pilgrims, then why are you all preventing me from bathing?"

"Because it is our wish," they replied arrogantly. Varni assumed the form of Lord Vaman, to the amazement of the assembled ascetics. They fell at his feet and then allowed Varni to bathe in the Gaumukhi Ganga. After completing his daily rituals, he left the place. But before that the ascetics gathered round him and requested, "Brahmachariji! Please stay here. After giving us true knowledge of your identity where are you going now?"

Varni replied, "This is not knowledge. This is merely darshan. You will get knowledge of my form when you install me in your hearts. For that you will have to give up your base nature and become true sadhus."

The ascetics were lost in thought. Without renouncing one's base nature one cannot attain saintliness. They fell at Varni's feet and said, "Bless us so that we can become true sadhus."

Varni replied, "When there is a confluence of my blessings and your efforts

then you will attain saintliness. You should follow the principles for which you have renounced the world." Saying this he proceeded on his onward journey.

He came to Dattatreya peak on Mt. Girnar. He had the darshan of the foot-prints of Dattatreya. Then he cast a glance at the entire Sorath region. When he decided to step down, his eyes fell on an ascetic. The ascetic, because of his austerity, was able to recognise the divinity of Varni. Varni put his hand on the ascetic's shoulder and asked him, "For how long have you been performing austerities here?"

"For 12 years," the ascetic replied briefly, because he wanted to hear more from the young Brahmachari.

"With what aim are you performing austerities?" Varni asked.

"My aim is to have the darshan of Dattatreya," saying this he began to look at Varni steadily. Then Varni appeared in the form of Guru Dattatreya. The ascetic at once prostrated before Nilkanth.

Varni told him, "Retain this *murti* in your mind. You shall attain Akshardham." The ascetic had the *murti* permanently etched in his heart. When he looked again at his inner self he saw the effulgent *murti* of Varni there. He felt fulfilled.

Unholy Conduct

The young Brahmachari started his descent. After coming down, Nilkanth went straight to Dharmadas' place which is near Godha vav. At that time some ascetics were being served lunch. Nilkanth Varni also sat in one of the rows. But the ascetics were unscrupulous and notorious. They told Nilkanth to get up. He sat at some other place. Again he was made to get up. Varni sat at seven different places but he was not allowed to eat.

From there Varni came to the Hatkesh mandir. There, a Nagar Brahmin saw Nilkanth. The glow on Varni's face made the Brahmin feel that the young Brahmachari was no ordinary sadhu. After having darshan of Shiv he came near Varni. Nilkanth recognised at once that the Brahmin was a true spiritual seeker. The Brahmin also felt the divinity of Varni. The Brahmin asked, "Maharaj! It is my wish to offer you food. Will you accept it?"

Nilkanth liked his sweet voice and the gentle manners. Varni immediately replied, "Whatever you bring I shall eat."

The Brahmin rushed home. He got *shiro* and *puri* prepared and brought them to the Hatkesh mandir. Nilkanth offered it first to the Shaligram and ate a little. The Nagar was a sharp observer. He had learnt that the wayward ascetics did not allow Varni to eat at Dharmadas' place. Even though Varni was hungry he ate very little of the delicious food offered to him! The Nagar joined his palms and said, "Brahmachariji! You have hardly eaten anything."

"Eating is an act to preserve the body, not a means to indulge the senses. Renunciants do not like pleasures of the senses," Nilkanth replied to the point.

The Nagar Brahmin was convinced that his devotion to Shiv had borne fruit with the darshan of Nilkanth. He was absorbed in the personality of the young Brahmachari and even after going home he was constantly thinking of him. At night Varni gave him darshan as Shivji.

Varni spent the night at Hatkesh and left early in the morning. At daybreak Nilkanth Varni reached Bhutnath Mahadev. After having darshan of Shivji, he left the place. He rested at Khengar Vav, drank some water and travelled to Vanthali. Here he bathed in the Suryakund. He accepted alms from the almshouse and spent the night there. A few hours before the break of dawn, he set out on his onward journey

and reached Piplana.

Narsinh Mehta of Piplana

He entered the courtyard of Narsinh Mehta, and gave a call 'Narayan hare, Sachchidanand Prabhu'. At that time Mehta was engaged in bathing the Shaligram. His wife had gone out to fetch water. On hearing the call Mehta's younger daughter came out. She saw the radiant face of Nilkanth and told him, "Brahmachariji, please wait for some time. I shall give you a fresh, hot *rotlo*."

But the young ascetic was not interested in such tasty food. He said, "Give me whatever that is ready." Saying this he left the place. While going he cast a glance at the Shaligram that Mehta was worshipping. It let out a glow. Mehta was wonder-struck by the phenomenon and stood up. He came out and asked his son, Kalyan, "Did somebody come here?"

The boy replied, "Yes father. A *brahmachari* came. He was asking for food. But we did not have anything ready, so he left."

Mehta did not like this. He said at once, "What a fool you are! How could you let a sadhu seeking alms go away like that? Go quickly and bring him back."

Kalyanji set off to find Varni, who by that time had reached the bank of the Ojhat river. The boy shouted, "Hey Maharaj! Hey Brahmachari! Please come back. My father is calling you."

Nilkanth heard the shout and stopped. The boy came near him and caught hold of his hand and said, "Maharaj! Please come back."

Varni turned back at the innocent boy's request. He came to Narsinh Mehta's house. Mehta bowed to him with reverence and offered the young Brahmachari a seat. He told him, "Brahmachariji! Please wait for a shortwhile, the food is being pre-

pared."

But Varni was in a hurry. He said, "Get whatever is ready. I have set out on a pilgrimage. So I will not lose time just for food."

Realising the urgency, Mehta said, "Give him the grains that have been soaked in water last night. The Brahmachari will not wait."

Then Varni was given jowar and milk. He mixed them and started eating. Mehta asked slowly, "Brahmachari! Your veins are showing up. You are a bag of skin and bones. Are you performing severe austerities to find God or for some other reason?"

"To find God," was Varni's brief reply.

"Then Maharaj! Our guru, Ramanand Swami, is like God himself. If you meet him your austerities will bear fruit," Narsinh Mehta said in a hurry.

On hearing this the young Brahmachari, with a morsel in hand looked up, and asked eagerly, "Who is Ramanand Swami?"

By then the women of the neighbourhood started trooping in. They all began to have darshan of the young Brahmachari.

"Ramanand Swami is our guru. Under instructions from him we distribute alms. He has a large following of sadhus and devotees. At present only he can show the way to salvation," he said.

"I shall certainly meet him," said Varni while removing the chaff from the grains.

Then he drank the milk that was left in the bowl. Seeing this the women said, "Brahmachari seems to be like God in looks, but he cares a lot for taste."

Brahmachari smiled on hearing this and said, "The taste is in Mehtaji's sentiments. Otherwise, there is nothing but God in me."

Vain Search

Narsinh Mehta was staring at Varni. He was lost in thought: many years ago he had gone to the Girnar region to attain God. He wandered around the caves and circumambulated the sacred spots, but did not find God. Such was his despondency that he decided to give up life. But then he realised from within that he could have communion with God if he is alive. God will himself come to his house and knock at the door to give darshan if he has true faith. So he returned. Meanwhile he met Ramanand Swami. He thought that the guru himself was God. But the guru said, "I am only the avatar of Uddhav. The manifest form of God will come and meet you."

Today he remembered the words of his guru while having Varni's darshan. It appeared to him as if God had come in person to visit his house! He thought that what the womenfolk said was right, the young Brahmachari looks like God himself! Then suddenly he noticed that the Brahmachari was changing. Varni appeared to Mehta like the four-armed form of Vishnu. His joy knew no bounds!

Nilkanth Varni finished his meal and got up. He shook Mehta. Mehta came out of the samadhi. He saw that Varni was preparing to leave so he started praying to the young Brahmachari. Varni said, "I shall come again."

Mehta went to see him off. When he came to the banks of the Ojhat, Mehta saw yet another miracle. The Brahmachari appeared to him as the supreme God. The deities of different universes were seen praying to Nilkanth. Then the ten principal incarnations of God emerged out of Varni's divine form and after giving darshan to Mehta, they merged back into Nilkanth Varni. There was unbounded bliss on Mehta's face who was savouring this divine experience.

Varni crossed the Ojhat river and went to Akha village. To the east of the village

outskirts lies a forest of tamarind trees. The trees provided a thick cover. Varni sat under a tree, such that nobody could see him. There were so many pious people in the village but Varni decided not to awaken them this time. So he stayed in the forest for some time and then left for Madhada.

Celibates Get Their Due

In Madhada, Varni went straight to Jetha Mer's house. Jetha was sitting on a cot in his courtyard. When he saw the young ascetic he at once got up and bowed at his feet. He said with great humility, "Maharaj! I am a Mer by caste. Please come and sanctify my house. Our family priest says that a guest is like God himself."

Varni smiled at the words spoken from the heart.

Jetha accommodated Varni in a verandah opposite the courtyard. Then he went to call his priest. Mer's wife engaged herself in acquiring provisions needed to prepare food. The priest came. It was he who had given guidance to Jetha Mer on how to identify God, but at that moment the priest was thinking about making laddus so he bowed before Varni from far and engaged himself in preparing lunch.

When the food was ready, Varni offered it to the Shaligram, ate some and gave the remainder to Mer as *prasad*. Both husband and wife were observing lifetime celibacy. So their inner self was pure. They had no worldly desires. Their only wish was to attain God by observing *brahmacharya*. Today, God had come to their home. Jetha Mer was immersed in the thought of Varni's form.

At night Varni gave a discourse to Mer. The latter was a true seeker of salvation. He had the seeds of dharma in him. So the discourse sounded like music to his ears. Varni slept late at night. Mer and his wife lay down to sleep, but their

eyes were focused on Varni. Meanwhile the wife said, "How radiant the face of this Brahmachari is! The words coming out of his mouth are like fragrant flowers. We feel like listening to him endlessly."

While conversing in this way both became immersed in Varni's resplendent form. Then they experienced samadhi, in which they had the darshan of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiv. The three of them were standing near Varni's feet and praying to him. Both Jetha Mer and his wife were greatly surprised! They were convinced that Nilkanth was the supreme God himself! All the deities had assembled there. The divinities served Varni with great devotion. The Mer couple was greatly astonished by this! They were absorbed in the divine bliss of God. Through the grace of Varni they experienced the blissful state of samadhi. They did not have the time to fathom as to which merit or action had endowed them with this blissful experience. But Varni knew that the couple had undertaken many births since Satyug, and they had been observing *brahmacharya* throughout these *yugs*.

Varni got up early next morning. After waking up Jetha Mer, he said, "Permit me to leave."

There were tears in Mer's eyes. He said, "My Lord! It is our good fortune that you have come here. And now your departure is our bad luck."

There were tears in Varni's eyes too. He had toured through the length and breadth of the country but he had not come across such a celibate couple! Even great sages like Chyavan, Parashar, Saubhari and others had their austerities disturbed as they could not control their carnal desires. Varni had manifested to propagate *brahmacharya*. By observing *brahmacharya* one attains the state of God-realisation. For the Mer couple it had become a way of life. That was why Varni had come to give Jetha Mer his darshan. The pious couple had tears in their eyes as Nilkanth

was leaving them. "I shall come again," he assured them and continued his onward journey.

Varni Visits Mangrol

From Madhada Nilkanth came to Mangrol. He sat on the outskirts of the village by the stepwell called Dosa Vav. Meanwhile, a village merchant, Govardhan Sheth, came there. He saw Varni. He thought of inviting the Brahmachari for a feast held that day as part of the death rituals of his aunt. The Sheth bowed to Varni and asked him with folded hands, "Maharaj! Will you eat something?"

"Yes, bring whatever is ready," Varni replied.

Govardhan rushed home and brought some *sukhdi* and *ganthiya* for Varni. Varni first offered them to Thakorji, ate a little himself and returned the rest as *prasad* to Govardhan. Then he asked, "How did you get the food so quickly?"

Govardhan explained, "Today, we have arranged a meal in memory of my Aunt Putli who passed away twelve days ago. So the food was readily available at home."

Varni said, "But your aunt is in hell."

Govardhan was taken aback. He felt that the Brahmachari was lying. How can a disciple of Ramanand Swami go to hell! He said, "You are lying. How could it be? She was a disciple of Ramanand Swami."

Varni smiled and said, "If you do not believe me, then see for yourself." Varni cast a glance on him. Govardhan went into samadhi. He saw the gates of hell and his aunt inside suffering various tortures. On seeing Govardhan she pleaded, "Govardhan, please take me away from here."

Govardhan was surprised. He woke up and asked Varni, "What sin landed my aunt in hell?"

Nilkanth Varni told him the whole matter, "She had deceitfully kept Ramanand Swami's gold, given to her for safe keeping. And when Ramanand Swami told her to return the gold, she lied saying that she didn't have it. Therefore she is in hell. Compared to all sins, the sin of deceiving one's guru incurs the highest punishment!" Govardhan remembered that his Aunt Putli was greedy. But he did not know that she had gone to the extent of cheating her own guru. Then he appealed to Varni, "Maharaj! Please release her from the tortures of hell."

Varni once again sent Govardhan into a samadhi. By his grace Govardhan's powers increased and he defeated Yama's servants. And his aunt was freed from the tortures of hell.

Varni told him, "Now your aunt has gone to Badrikashram. She will have to perform austerities to dissolve her sins. As a result of her repentance she will be born into Satsang. Then she will attain moksha."

11. End of Journey

1800

Nilkanth's pilgrimage on foot was coming to an end. He had toured the different pilgrim places of the country for seven years, one month and eleven days. In the course of his spiritual odyssey he had met prominent mahants, heads of ashrams, and seen their lifestyles and understood their views on religion. Some refused to accept God, some turned humanism into a mockery, some merely remained steeped in addictions, and some were interested mainly in wealth, women and other worldly things. Varni had seen different types of fake ascetics. He had come across ascetics who indulged in mumbo-jumbo, were experts in black magic and had seen them performing their nefarious deeds. But he had not seen anybody with a pure mind who could help one realise God. He was in search of such a sadhu. And if he did not find one he wished to create a sadhu on earth who would shun liquor, meat, women; oppose violent religion; honour the five observances – egolessness, non-covetousness, celibacy, unconcern for taste and non-attachment to relatives – and implement them in his daily conduct; inspire others to follow the same in their lives and who would worship God and make others do the same. He was in search of such a place and in search of such

souls.

That great search was coming to a close. Varni left Mangrol on Wednesday, 21 August 1799 (A.S. 1856, Shravan *vad* 6), for Lojpur.

Lojpur – End of an Epic Pilgrimage

Lojpur, a village in the corner of Saurashtra, does not even appear like a dot on the map of this vast country. Even then, being a sacred land, the supreme God sanctified it with his lotus feet. He decided to spread his divine mission from this holy place itself. Nilkanth had not stayed for long in any of the places or holy places he had visited in the course of his travels. But this land attracted him. As if someone was calling him and eagerly waiting to welcome him, Varni journeyed from Mangrol towards Loj. The fact that Nilkanth Varni, an eleven-year-old boy, planned his travels throughout the country, from beginning to end, reflected his vision and divinity.

No obstacles could stop him. He rejected the offers of becoming mahant of ashrams and offers made by kings to accept their kingdoms and their daughters in marriage. Lojpur was his focal point for spreading Bhagvat Dharma. That was why he wished to come to Loj. The guru there was waiting for him. The sadhus there were the ones who could imbibe his messages. The place was inhabited by souls who were simple but pure at heart. Everything he was looking for was there in Loj. Varni was delighted on entering this land.

When Nilkanth set foot on the soil of Loj, dawn was spreading its wings. The rains in the months of July and August had saturated the land. The farms and gardens were of lush green colour all the way. Jowar and millet crops were swaying in the breeze, and the droplets of rain were falling to make them yet taller, such that,

even the camels would not be able to reach them. The cows were sitting with ease at the outskirts of the village. The village women were going to the stepwell to fill their pots with drinking water. Nilkanth had already finished his ablutions by the time the women came to draw water. He was sitting in deep meditation on a stone slab beneath a tree by the bank of the well.

When the eyes of the village women fell on Nilkanth they stood as if rooted to the spot. They thought, "Such an emaciated body yet a radiant glow on his face! How does the ascetic arouse our inner feelings and attraction for him!" Their hearts melted on seeing the severe privation the young sadhu must have put himself through. His face proclaimed renunciation of the highest order. They thought that he must have left home either to escape the taunts of his sister-in-law or because he was fed up with his relatives. How insensitive could the mother be who would allow such a young boy to take to *sannyas*. Slowly all the women came and stood before Nilkanth. Varni was in deep meditation. As neither their talk nor the rattle of the vessels had any affect on Nilkanth, they left the place reluctantly to fill their vessels. But their hearts were rooted to where Nilkanth was sitting in meditation.

Meanwhile, a sadhu from the ashram came for filling water. On seeing him the women hurriedly left the place. The sadhu saw the young Brahmachari and was drawn towards him. He was greatly surprised at that. This was not the case even with regard to his own guru. the Brahmachari was young but the glow on his face was very captivating. He waited for him to come out of his meditation. But Nilkanth was totally immersed in dhyan. After a little while, he too went to fetch water.

After filling the vessel he once again came to where Varni was. He was experi-

encing an indescribable joy at the darshan of Nilkanth. He decided to invite the young ascetic to his ashram. Varni was testing his patience. Even though he had a big pot filled with water on his head, the sadhu waited for the ascetic to come out of meditation.

Invitation to Ramanand Swami's Ashram

Nilkanth made out that the sadhu was a true spiritual seeker. So, he opened his eyes. Immediately the sadhu came before Nilkanth, but could not look straight into his eyes. Nilkanth's open eyes enhanced his dazzling personality. There was a sparkle in his eyes and the capacity to awaken the inner self. The sadhu was savouring this experience.

The sadhu slowly enquired of Nilkanth, "Brahmachariji! Where do you come from? What is your name? What are the names of your parents? Why did you renounce? Who is your guru? I am eager to know all the answers."

Nilkanth smiled sweetly at these questions. He said, "Sadhuram! An ascetic has no caste, creed, religion, place, country or relatives. One who redeems him from worldly ties are his parents and guru. I am looking for such a guru."

The sadhu was happy on hearing this from Varni. He thought the Brahmachari was young but knowledgeable and not one given to mundane attachments. With folded hands he addressed Nilkanth, "Brahmachariji! What you say is true. But it is an etiquette to ask such questions. That's why I am asking."

Nilkanth realised that the sadhu was a true seeker of salvation. So he gave a brief account of himself. Then he said, "Sadhuram! What's your name? Whose disciple are you? To which Sampraday do you belong?"

The sadhu replied, "My name is Sukhanand. Our guru is Swami Ramanand. He belongs to the Ramanuj Sampraday. His ashram is nearby. There are fifty sadhus in the ashram."

"Is guru Ramanand Swami here?" Nilkanth asked eagerly.

"No, currently he is in Kutch. But his principal disciple Muktanand Swami is here. He is a great sadhu, endowed with noble qualities." Sukhanand Swami continued after a pause, "Please come to our ashram. We shall be honoured to receive you. All the sadhus in the ashram will have the benefit of your darshan. Our ashram will be sanctified. Even our senior sadhu, Muktanand Swami, will be very happy."

Varni was pleased by the sadhu's manners. There was wisdom, politeness and saintlity in his voice. One is judged by how and what one speaks. Nilkanth Varni liked the sadhu. But he did not want to go into the village. He said, "Sadhuram! I never go to an inhabited place. Wherever I have gone I have always stayed under a tree or in a secluded spot."

Sukhanand Swami was a bit disappointed on hearing this. He said once again, "You are a divine being. Your darshan is difficult even for the deities. With your darshan the sadhus of our ashram will be fulfilled. Be kind to us (and sanctify our ashram), otherwise Muktanand Swami will himself come here to receive you."

Nilkanth Varni desired to meet Muktanand Swami and the other sadhus. He also wished to know more about Ramanand Swami. He got up and told Sukhanand Swami, "Sadhuram, let's go. I would not like to trouble Muktanand Swami by making him come here."

Sukhanand Swami's joy knew no bounds when he heard this. His enthusiasm to introduce Muktanand Swami to this ascetic was seen in his stride!

Varni was taking rapid strides. Sukhanand too was enthusiastic and moving fast.

But he had a pot on his head filled with water and the weight was hindering him in keeping pace with Varni. Sukhanand thought in his mind, "Why is Varni in such a tearing hurry?" He started to run and because of this the water in the pot was spilling over.

Varni said, "Sukhanand, Time moves at a fast pace. But the souls in the universes do not become disoriented. Your pace is so fast that you are spilling water."

Sukhanand replied, "Lord, the souls in the universe are bound to *maya,* so they are steady. If they are unsteady then *maya's* work would prove false."

On hearing this Varni smiled. He said, "Then be bound to Brahma. That will make you steady."

Sukhanand was taken aback! When the young Brahmachari talked of Brahma he saw in him flashes of Ramanand Swami and Muktanand Swami. He wondered how one so young could have acquired such subtle knowledge?

Meeting Muktanand Swami

Just then they reached the ashram. At the gate Varni saw a sadhu who was the personification of gentleness. He offered *pranams* to Varni. Varni guessed that he must be Muktanand Swami. Varni saw in his eyes love that could fill the entire universe. His personality proclaimed austereness and renunciation of the highest order. The glow on Swami's face reflected his observance of *brahmacharya*. Muktanand Swami held Varni's hand with affection and brought him inside. In this sadhu Varni saw true saintliness which he had never seen in any of the sadhus he had come across during his travels.

Meanwhile, Sukhanand Swami placed the pot in the room and came there. He told Muktanand Swami, "Swami! I met this Varni at the well. His divine glow

attracted me. All my worldly desires dissolved. My senses started drawing inwards. I experienced great bliss so I brought him here."

"It is our duty to honour our guests. But this Varni is not a mere guest. He is one endowed with great spiritual powers. Today our ashram has been sanctified," replied Muktanand Swami.

Muktanand Swami asked Varni to sit down. Sukhanand Swami went in search of a seat for Varni. Meanwhile, Nilkanth sat on the ground. When Sukhanand brought a cushion for him, he said, "The entire earth is my seat. Why honour the body with a seat?"

These words awakened the inner feelings of Muktanand Swami. He thought that what Sukhanand Swami had said about Varni was true. Then Varni spoke briefly about his wanderings and of the absence of virtues among most of the sadhus he had met. He talked about their arrogance and lack of knowledge about *atma* and Paramatma (God).

Meanwhile, the other sadhus of the ashram started arriving there for Nilkanth's darshan. They were all attracted by the divinity of the young Brahmachari. They were greatly impressed by the friendly disposition of Varni which they recognised instantly. Everybody saluted him. Varni returned the salutations by touching the earth and offering a *pranam*.

He said, "Swamiji! After seeing your ashram and the sadhus my mind has experienced great peace."

Muktanand Swami said, "Varni! Please do not hesitate. Say whatever is in your mind."

So Nilkanth said, "Wherever I have gone I have asked questions about spiritual knowledge and its principles. But I have not met anybody who has a true knowledge

of philosophy."

Varni's extraordinary divinity had impressed everyone. Everybody wished that Varni should stay and come in contact with Ramanand Swami. But these words of Varni made them apprehensive. What could Varni's philosophy be? If things at the ashram were different from his way of thinking he might leave the ashram. In the course of his wanderings through forests he may not have stayed at a place because of such differences. These were the nagging doubts of the assembled sadhus. Muktanand Swami steeled himself and said humbly, "Varni! Whatever questions you ask I shall certainly reply as per my understanding of what guru Ramanand Swami has taught me."

Muktanand Swami Answers Varni's Questions

Varni said with a smile, "My questions are not difficult. But, they are essential for the understanding of the principles of philosophical knowledge and implementing them in life to attain moksha. So please think carefully before answering my questions." Then Varni ended the suspense by putting his questions. "Swami! What is *jiva* (individual soul)? Who is *ishwar*? And what is *maya*? Then please explain what is Brahma and Parabrahma."

After hearing the questions, Muktanand Swami was lost in thought. The questions appeared to be very profound. But he had discussed these questions with Ramanand Swami on several occasions. "The fact that at such a young age you are able to ask such deep questions shows your greatness. If my answers satisfy you I shall consider it my good fortune." And so saying he started answering the questions.

"The *jiva* (soul) is subtle like an atom, eternal, unpierceable, indestructible, has

no parts, is formless, sentient and enters a physical body that is gross, subtle and causal. It is the embodiment and receptacle of knowledge. when it enters a physical body, it resides in the heart by its extraordinary power. It pervades the gross body by its ordinary power. It is in bondage because of mundane desires due to past impressions. The *jivas* are innumerable.

"Like the *jiva, ishwar* also has subtle, gross and causal body. It has the powers of creation, sustenance and destruction in its designated universe. Ishwar's body, like that of the *jiva,* is composed of the five elements (earth, water, fire, wind and space) which are more potent than that of the *jiva's* body. And it is the all-knower.

"*Maya* is the power of Paramatma (God). It is responsible for creating in *jivas* the links of I-ness and Mine-ness with its body and relations. It has the modes of goodness *(sattvagun),* passion *(rajogun)* and darkness or ignorance *(tamogun)*. By nature it is non-sentient and because of the *jivas* that reside in its womb it is also believed sentient. It has both manifest and unmanifest forms. It is eternal. Paramatma, through his power of *maya* creates, sustains and destroys our worlds and universes.

"Now I shall talk of Brahma. Brahma is also called Akshar. Brahma has two forms – *sakar* (personal, with form) and *nirakar* (without form). In its *sakar* form Brahma is ever engaged in the service of Parabrahma. It is the dwelling place or abode of Paramatma and his *muktas.* In its *nirakar* form it is omnipresent and the inspirer and supporter of *jiva, ishwar* and *maya*. This Aksharbrahma is the source of light to all. It has both form (*sagun*) and formlessness (*nirgun*). In its *sagun* form it is so colossal that countless universes float in every pore of its body. In its *nirgun* form it is subtler than the atom. Its greatness is such that all deities live in

Aksharbrahma with their abodes. This Aksharbrahma is the cause of all causes, except that of Parabrahma, and is immutable. It is also the body of Purushottam (God) and Purushottam is its *atma*. Aksharbrahma has an eternal and undivided bond with Parabrahma. We can realise Parabrahma only through Aksharbrahma."

Nilkanth Varni was looking at Muktanand Swami intently and listening in rapt attention as he spoke on these subtle topics. There was sweetness in his voice and poetic grace in his scholarly exposition. The discourse was cogent, leading from one point to another. The young Brahmachari was listening to it with great joy. Now and then he would utter the words 'Hare, Hare' out of agreement. There was nothing in it that could cast a doubt on the scholarship of Muktanand Swami. When the discourse on the greatness of Brahma was over Varni merely said, "Wonderful! Now continue."

Muktanand Swami smiled and said, "Now we have only to describe the nature of Parabrahma." Saying this he picked up the thread of his narrative, "Parabrahma or Purushottam is the Lord of Akshardham. He is the soul of Aksharbrahma, the cause of all causes, including that of Aksharbrahma, and eternally having a divine form. He is one and unique. He is worthy of worshipping with the highest form of devotion (*ekantik bhav*). Knowing him, one can cross the ocean of death and attain moksha."

Varni interrupted Muktanand Swami at this point and said, "Splendid Muktanandji! You have given the exact description of the natures of *jiva, ishwar, maya,* Brahma and Parabrahma. I had asked these questions to many, but they did not believe that *jiva* and *ishwar* are different. They also believed that Brahma and Parabrahma are one and the same. Some said that God is formless. And when some said that God has a form then they understood him to be a human being

only. Everyone found it difficult to answer these subtle questions. This knowledge that you have realised reflects the grace of your guru Ramanand Swami upon you."

Muktanand Swami added, "What I have explained to you is what my guru, Ramanand Swami, has taught me."

After this Varni appeared to be slightly uneasy. Muktanand Swami queried, "Why have you become restless?"

Varni said, "I am eager to meet Ramanand Swami who is a great guru. But you told me he is in Kutch. When is he expected back?"

Muktanand Swami understood Varni's eagerness to meet his guru. He said, "Varni knowing your eagerness to meet him, Ramanand Swami will return early."

The young Brahmachari was in a hurry and asked, "Swami, what if I go to Kutch myself?"

On hearing this Muktanand Swami was slightly saddened. He wanted to retain Varni for as long as possible at the ashram. He had never seen such an ascetic before. He said, "Varni! There is a gulf. The route is very difficult because you have to cross a desert."

The young Brahmachari smiled. He thought that rivers resembling an ocean and mountains like the Himalayas did not deter him, then of what measure is a mere gulf. But he understood Muktanand Swami's sentiments. If he went to Kutch then Muktanand Swami would not approve of it. And Nilkanth had no desire to cause any unhappiness to him. "As you wish," he said to Muktanand Swami and offered him *pranams.*

Nilkanth continued, "Swami! My mind is attracted to none other than God."

On hearing this Muktanand Swami replied, "Varni, there is no difference

between Ramanand Swami and God. They are one and the same. God has manifested himself through Ramanand Swami to redeem souls." Varni saw Muktanand Swami's true guru bhakti for Ramanand Swami. He once again humbly offered his respects to Muktanand Swami and said, "Swami! You have graced me immensely. You have acquired pure knowledge from your guru. Always shower your grace upon me. Whenever you feel it appropriate tell me, teach me and treat me as your own." After this Varni requested Muktanand Swami to describe to him of the glory of Ramanand Swami.

Muktanand Swami gave a comprehensive talk on the glory of his guru. The youthful yogi thought it was wonderful. He witnessed the acme of Krishna bhakti in Ramanand Swami's life. He remembered that his father used to speak highly of Ramanand Swami's greatness. The Brahmachari's eagerness to have darshan of Ramanand Swami increased. But Muktanand Swami assured him that his guru would return to the ashram in a month or two. So he decided to wait for Ramanand Swami.

JANMASHTMI FESTIVAL

Preparations for the Janmashtmi festival commenced on a grand scale. The mandir was decorated with garlands of flowers and leaves. Banana plants were tied to the doors as traditionally done on such occasions. The whole place echoed to the strains of the *shehnai* and the beating of drums. The festive spirit overwhelmed the tiny village. From early morning the fervour of bhajans was witnessed at the mandir. Devotees began to arrive with their offerings to God.

At 12 midnight *arti* was offered to Shri Krishna to mark his birth. There was music to the accompaniment of drums and cymbals. The small *murti* of Balmukund

was placed in a cradle. After *arti* Varni entered the assembly and spoke about the glory of Shri Krishna. The devotees had the darshan of Varni and then proceeded to the mandir. But in the cradle instead of Balmukund, they saw Varni! They rubbed their eyes in amazement. They went to the assembly again. To their surprise they found Varni was discoursing there! The young yogi's austerities, renunciation and piety were the objects of their wonder. Their ecstasy increased all the more on seeing Shri Krishna in Varni.

The next day, as was his practice, Muktanand Swami went to deliver a discourse at Jivraj Sheth's compound adjacent to the mandir. Varni also went along with the other sadhus. But the young Brahmachari felt ill at ease on seeing an assembly in which men and women sat together. He stood up to leave when the discourse was about to reach its climax. This surprised all those who were present. Muktanand Swami ordered, "Varni! Sit down. The rule is that the audience should get up only at the conclusion of the discourse."

"I know the rule. But after renouncing the world, sitting with women to discourse to them or to listen with them creates a lapse in a renunciant's character. The practice of eight-fold *brahmacharya* is hindered by the contact of women. Sadhus should not see, touch or speak to women. This has been ordained by the shastras," the young Brahmachari said quietly. Then Varni left the assembly.

Muktanand Swami thought that as Varni was of young age, he did not approve of the assembly out of his strict adherence to *brahmacharya.* He would explain to Nilkanth later on. He continued with his discourse. But as Nilkanth Varni left the assembly, a numbing silence descended as if everybody's heart had gone alongwith him! Everybody lost their power of concentration. Muktanand Swami was greatly surprised.

NILKANTH'S DISCOURSE

The following day, Muktanand Swami again picked up his book and went to deliver the discourse. Nilkanth followed him with another book. When the discourse was about to begin Nilkanth got up and said, "O sadhus! Please come to the mandir. I shall discourse to you. It is not proper for you to sit with women and listen to the discourse. Such a conduct violates the dharma of an ascetic." So saying, Nilkanth Varni started walking towards the mandir.

When the sadhus followed him Muktanand Swami witnessed yet another example of the young celibate's magnetic personality. He had experienced the greatness of Varni, so he tied the cord of his book and told the women, "Mothers! I bid you farewell, for Varni's reign has begun. Hereafter we will not even see or talk to women." Then he too joined the gathering that was going inside the mandir to listen to Varni's discourse.

For spiritual advancement and worship, *brahmacharya* is at the core. Nilkanth wished to inspire the practice of absolute celibacy during his lifetime. Muktanand Swami was much older than him. He was the chief disciple of Ramanand Swami and the most powerful person in the ashram, next only to his guru. But Nilkanth felt that in observing dharma even minor deviations cannot be allowed or tolerated! Dharma is a limb of God. When this limb gets broken, the root of worship becomes rotten. This was the first step by Nilkanth Varni to establish *brahmacharya* dharma.

A HOLE IN DHARMA

One day Nilkanth saw a hole in the wall of the mandir and asked the sadhus, "What is this hole here for?"

The artless sadhus replied, "If coal embers become extinguished then fresh fire can be lighted by borrowing embers from the neighbouring barber's house."

"Who gives you the fresh fire?" Nilkanth asked.

"The womenfolk of the house, who else?" was the answer.

This distressed the young Brahmachari. He sent for Muktanand Swami and said, "This hole in the wall will one day breach the sadhu's dharma. It is not proper for sadhus to have such contacts with women." So saying Varni did not wait for Muktanand Swami's order but got some bricks and lime and covered the hole with his own hands. All the sadhus were watching. Even Muktanand Swami thought the young Brahmachari was doing the right thing. He thought that even though it is written in the shastras that sadhus should observe rigorous *brahmacharya*, no one in the history of spirituality had insisted on observing it fully except this Varni.

The ashram residents started to appreciate Varni and his ways. Soon the liking turned into respect for him as a guru. Nilkanth on his part was inclined towards doing physical services. No work was too small for him. He would bring leaves and stitch them into plates, collect dung cakes and fuel wood for cooking, clean grains, fetch water and also cook the food. After everyone had finished eating food he would wash the utensils. Not only this, but he would sometimes pick up the *kavad* and go to neighbouring villages chanting 'Ramakrishna dhuni dhuni' seeking alms.

On several occasions Muktanand Swami tried to restrain him from going to beg for alms, but he would smile and say, "One has to earn one's food. Without work a man becomes lazy. If the body is utilised in the service of so many sadhus, God will be pleased."

Muktanand Swami merely listened intently and approved of Varni's principles.

Teaching Meditation

In the afternoon Nilkanth would take the sadhus to the garden opposite the mandir for meditation. He carried a cane while he moved amongst them. Whenever any sadhu's mind strayed from meditation, he gently poked him with the cane and said, "Your mind is straying. What are you meditating on?"

The sadhus realised that Varni was able to read their thoughts. They sometimes used to wonder whether Ramanand Swami himself had come in the guise of the young Brahmachari!

Eagerness for Darshan

Varni had become eager to have darshan of Ramanand Swami. He wished to demonstrate the ideal of guru bhakti. One day Anandjibhai Sanghedia came to Loj from Mangrol for the darshan of Muktanand Swami. He was going to Bhuj. On hearing this, Varni sought Muktanand Swami's permission to go to Bhuj. The senior sadhu felt that Varni would not stay in Loj for long. But if he had darshan of Ramanand Swami, then he would stay. Thinking thus, Muktanand Swami gave his consent. So, Varni went to Mangrol with Anandjibhai. They stopped there for the night, and in the morning both of them proceeded to Kalvani. There they had food at the house of Jetha Mer and Raja Mer. They also got ready to go to Bhuj. All four took the road to Bhuj. After walking for some distance they came to Mesvan village.

There Varni suddenly sat down at the village outskirt, on the bank of the river. He told the other three to proceed. "I shall not come," he said. Anandjibhai pleaded

with him but he did not join them. Disappointed, Anandjibhai, Jetha Mer and Raja Mer took Mayaram Bhatt from Manavadar with them and set off for Bhuj.

They had darshan of Ramanand Swami at Bhuj. They narrated with utmost happiness the story of Nilkanth Varni who had come to Loj out of the blue. Ramanand Swami was listening with concentration. He was all knowing. Nothing was hidden from him. The person for whom he was waiting had arrived at last. His happiness knew no bounds! It was writ all over his face. But how could others know about these things? Ramanand Swami used to say, "I am here only to play the drum and gather the pious. The real player who will redeem the pious will come later."

Embraces a Pillar

Ramanand Swami asked searching questions about the happenings at Loj. He then told Mayaram Bhatt, "When you go to Loj, tell Varni that if he is eager to stay in Satsang then he should be prepared to embrace the pillar."

Thereafter, Mayaram Bhatt, Anandjibhai and others returned to Loj.

Meanwhile, Nilkanth had left Mesvan and finally returned to Loj via Panchala. When Muktanand Swami saw Varni, he was both surprised and delighted. He asked, "Brahmachariji! Did you not go to Bhuj?"

Nilkanth Varni smiled and said no. So, Muktanand Swami said, "It's good. You will have Ramanand Swami's darshan here itself."

Muktanand Swami felt relieved after Nilkanth's return. He used to feel uneasy whenever Varni was away from him.

After a few days, Mayaram Bhatt and Anandjibhai arrived at Loj with Ramanand Swami's message. After paying respects to Nilkanth Varni, Mayaram

Bhatt delivered the message. No sooner did he hear the message, Varni got up and clasped a pillar. Muktanand Swami and the other sadhus were greatly surprised by Varni's eagerness to follow the guru's order. Mayaram Bhatt immediately explained, "Brahmachariji! What Ramanand Swami means is that if you want to stay in Satsang, you should obey the order of Muktanand Swami, who is like a pillar of Satsang."

Varni let go of the pillar and bowed to Muktanand Swami who held him in loving embrace.

Nilkanth Becomes Sarjudas

Nilkanth's stay at the ashram led to a distinct improvement in the level of moral and spiritual observance among the sadhus. In order to make him stay with them Muktanand Swami told him one day, "Varni! You are staying with us in the ashram, so with the order of guru Ramanand Swami dress like us."

Varni said at once, "Okay! I shall do whatever pleases you." Muktanand Swami was happy on hearing this.

The next day Varni was given two upper cloths and a long garment. Then Muktanand Swami told him, "From today you will be called Sarjudas as you have come from a place where the Saryu (Sarju) river flows!"

Nilkanth Varni smiled on hearing this. He said, "Swami! I am a guide on the path of attaining Brahma. Saryu and several other places, I have forgotten."

Muktanand Swami felt that Nilkanth's words were telling and full of meaning. For renunciants remembrance of their birthplace increases the attachment for the body and its relations. He bowed to Varni mentally.

Now, the villagers began to call him Sarjudas. He soon became the favourite

of the crowd. Whenever he went out to collect cow dung to make cakes, the village girls and women would compete with him. In order to get the better of them, he would either collect the dung before them or reserve it for himself by putting a mark on it, as was the custom in those days in the villages. Nobody else would touch such a pile. Even when some girls and women reached before him, he would stand at a distance, laughing. When the girls and women lifted the dung to put it in their baskets, they would see the entire universe under it. Then with a startle they would shout, 'O! Sarjuda,' and run away from there, leaving everything as it was. Despite this, everyone liked him immensely because he would collect lots of dung, and set apart one-third of the portion for the village.

A Heavy Load of Fruits

At the time of Janmashtmi, Varni had appeared in two forms. This had made everybody feel that God resided in him. Even then that feeling did not last for long in their hearts. Sarjudas would not allow it to last longer. He always kept himself engaged in performing menial services. Subsequently, people considered him as a servant and forget his divinity.

Two devotees from Shil village, about six miles away from Loj, came to Muktanand Swami and told him, "Swami, we have a bumper crop of *chibhdas* (a species of cucumber). "Send some sadhus to collect it. You can make pickles out of them."

Muktanand Swami immediately told Sukhanand Swami to go with the devotees and bring the consignment.

At that time Sarjudas said, "Swami! Can I go with him?"

Muktanand Swami replied, "Your body is very thin and weak. It would be good

if you don't go."

But Sukhanand Swami said, "It's okay. Let Sarjudas come with me."

Muktanand Swami permitted Varni to go to Shil. Deva Sheth, one of the devotees, also accompanied them.

The devotees gave around 360 kg of *chibhdas*. One devotee brought a cart to transport them to Loj. At that time Sarjudas said, "There is no need for the cart. Bring a large cloth and put the fruits inside and tie them up."

The devotees were perplexed. How could they tie such a heavy load into a single bundle? And even if a single bundle can be made how can it be lifted? But Varni insisted that they prepare a bundle. So the fruits were tied into two pieces of cloth. The larger bundle contained 320 kg of *chibhdas* and another smaller bundle contained 40 kg.

The thought on everyone's mind was who will lift the bundles? Sarjudas told the devotees to put the bundle on his head. Twelve people were called, and with hesitation, they put the bundle on Varni's head. To everyone's surprise, the bundle did not rest on his head but remained suspended in mid-air. Deva Sheth carried the 40 kg bundle on his head and alongwith Sarjudas set out for Loj.

On the way, Deva Sheth became tired of carrying his bundle. So Sarjudas told him to place the bundle above his bundle. Deva Sheth got on to a high place and placed his bundle on top of Varni's bundle. Like the larger one this too remained suspended in mid-air over the young Brahmachari's head. As they were proceeding towards Loj Deva started thinking about Varni's divine powers. Both of them soon reached Loj and Sarjudas set down his load behind the mandir.

When he learnt that Sarjudas was back, Muktanand Swami at once came out of his quarters. On looking at the two bundles, he asked, "Who carried these bundles?"

"Sarjudas carried them on his head," replied Deva Sheth.

On hearing this Muktanand Swami was upset and started scolding Deva Sheth, "Don't you know that such a heavy load should never be placed on Varni's head!"

Deva Sheth replied, "But Swami! The bundles were suspended a finger's length in mid-air over Varni's head! I had seen the miracle with my own eyes."

Muktanand Swami remained silent. He knew that Sarjudas was a divine person. He had such powers at his beck and call. His staying there itself was a surprise! Otherwise such a detached individual would never reside in one place. Meanwhile, the two bundles of *chibhdas* were carried into the mandir by 16 sadhus.

A marble memorial shrine has been set up in Loj where Varni had set down his load of fruits.

Lending a Helping Hand

After a few days Nilkanth was sent to Mangrol to help four sadhus who were running an almshouse. It was conducted at the place of a sadhu called Atmanand Swami at Khakh Chowk. Sarjudas liked to serve. He believed that giving alms to the needy was a great service! He started serving in the almshouse.

Meanwhile, the annakut festival arrived. It was celebrated on a grand scale. After the festival Atmanand Swami told Sarjudas, "Store the dry *prasad* and sweetfoods and distribute the rest to the needy. I am going to the village to distribute *prasad*, I shall return soon."

Atmanand Swami left for the village and people began to come for alms. Nilkanth who did not believe in keeping anything gave away everything to them. After returning from the village Atmanand Swami asked, "Where is the dry

prasad?"

Nilkanth replied, "The alms-seekers were many and I gave them all the food."

Atmanand Swami got angry. "Have you come here to give away everything? Get out of here," he shouted at him. Sarjudas left the place at once and went and sat on the edge of the village stepwell. Meanwhile Govardhanbhai Sheth came there and found Varni sitting alone at the stepwell. "Why are you sitting here?" he asked.

Varni told him the reason and then said, "If you bring materials for building a tent, we will start an almshouse here."

Govardhanbhai was aware of Varni's spiritual powers and greatness. He immediately sent men to get materials for the tent. It was set up in a short time. Then provisions were brought and an almshouse was opened.

Atmanand Swami became jealous because he thought that Varni had started the almshouse to compete with him. He did not realise the fact that donation of food should be carried out in as many places as possible to benefit the maximum number of needy people.

Sarjudas never hankered after popularity. He wished to bless people with ultimate liberation. Out of jealousy Atmanand directed all to Sarjudas' almshouse. Sarjudas lovingly served them. His popularity began to increase.

Brahmins' Request

One day the Brahmins of Mangrol approached Atmanand and requested, "Arrange a *chorashi* feast for the Brahmins of the town."

Atmanand replied angrily, "Go and tell Sarjudas. He will arrange for the feast as people praise him."

The Brahmins were not discouraged by Atmanand's reluctance. They were interested in a good meal. So they approached Sarjudas and told him. Sarjudas immediately called Govardhanbhai Sheth and said, "We have to feed the Brahmins."

The Sheth protested, "Maharaj! We are stretching our resources to the maximum and running the almshouse. Now how can we organise the *chorashi* feast?"

But Sarjudas was resolute. He said, "Sheth, tell all our beloved devotees to bring some provisions and we will make arrangements for the feast."

Gordhanbhai Sheth was a man of faith. He had great respect for Sarjudas. As directed by Varni he spoke to the devotees. Provisions for the feast began to arrive. Sarjudas sent for the Brahmins and told them, "The provisions have arrived. Come early in the morning and start cooking."

The next morning the Brahmins came. They started cooking in a place by the side of the stepwell. Atmanand Swami started burning with jealousy when the preparations for the feast got off without a hitch. But he was bent on creating trouble. He called the leaders of the Brahmin community and told them, "I know you have all come to eat laddus. But have you ever cared to inquire about the caste of Sarjudas. Or is it so that you want to deviate from observing your dharma out of your greed for laddus!"

The senior Brahmins were confused and decided to ask Sarjudas himself. Accordingly they went to him and asked about his antecedents. He merely smiled and showed them his divine powers and true form. The onlookers saw him sitting on a throne surrounded by an effulgence of countless suns, with countless *muktas* singing his praise. The spectacle made them realise that Sarjudas was none other than the supreme God himself. All of them offered their respects to him. The Brahmins had a nice feast. The event silenced the jealous Atmanand.

On the day following the feast an ascetic came to the almshouse. The sadhus began to give him alms. He refused to take them and said, "I shall eat with the mahant."

The sadhus started laughing. When Sarjudas sat for lunch he was served half a *rotlo,* a round ball of spicy hot green chillies. The ascetic was also served the same thing. His mouth started watering at the thought of eating the round ball which he thought was a laddu. He took a large morsel of it and put it in his mouth with a little *rotlo*. And immediately his tongue, eyes, nose started burning and watering. Sarjudas took pity on the ascetic and asked the sadhus, "Give him some ghee." Only thereafter did he feel a little comfortable.

Eager for Guru's Darshan

Sarjudas had a strong desire for Ramanand Swami's darshan. He had already spent seven months at the ashram and was getting restive. He was God himself, but in different stages of his earthly sojourn he had shown the many facets of a spiritually oriented person like guru bhakti, saintliness, *brahmacharya,* non-violence, compassion, etc. Even though he was united with Ramanand Swami by his yogic powers, his eagerness to have Ramanand Swami's darshan made the residents of the ashram feel that he was an ideal devotee.

Muktanand Swami realised that Varni could no longer be satisfied with further reasons and promises. So, on Saturday, 15 March 1800 (A.S. 1856, Fagan *vad* 5), he wrote a letter to Ramanand Swami. Sarjudas also wrote a letter. Mayaram Bhatt from Manavadar took those letters to Ramanand Swami. He reached Bhuj after a week's journey. He met Ramanand Swami at Gangaram Mal's house, where he was giving a discourse. Mayaram was a staunch disciple of the guru. The moment he set eyes on

Ramanand Swami, he forgot his surroundings. His eyes were focused on the guru. He experienced immense peace because he was meeting his guru after a long time. He repeatedly prostrated before the guru and contemplated on his physical form. In the end Ramanand Swami said, "Bhattji! You have performed enough prostrations. Stop now. What news have you brought from Loj?"

The Happy News

Even the assembled devotees were eager to hear the news from Loj. However, they were a little bit afraid that Bhatt had come in their midst to take Ramanand Swami away from them. Bhattji bowed at and touched Ramanand Swami's feet. Then he took the two letters from his bag and handed them over to Ramanand Swami. While receiving the letters Ramanand Swami's face glowed with great joy. He touched both the letters to his head. He reverentially touched Sarjudas' letter to his chest. Bhatt was quick to notice this. He was also attracted by the divine form of Sarjudas who had come into the ashram at Loj. Yet he was careful lest his mind becomes diverted from his profound bhakti and allegiance towards his guru.

Ramanand Swami first opened Muktanand Swami's letter. As he was reading it the joy in his heart was evident by the glow on his face. Slowly, his eyes were scanning each word of the letter so as not to miss a single word. Even then his hurriedness to read the part of the letter describing the personality of Nilkanth Varni could not be hidden. The devotees were watching with amazement the expressions on their guru's face. They knew that Ramanand Swami was beyond sorrow or joy. Then why the flush of emotions while reading the letter!

He finished reading Muktanand Swami's letter.

Pure Joy

Then Ramanand Swami opened the letter written by Sarjudas. The whole assembly was filled with a mass of divine light radiating from the letter of Sarjudas The minds of the devotees in the assembly became overwhelmed with purity. It was a unique experience for them. Guru Ramanand Swami started reading the letter. The words reflected the form of Sarjudas. Every word mirrored Nilkanth Varni's knowledge, detachment and devotion. His words were divine and transcendental. Ramanand Swami saw Sarjudas in his letter. A wave of joy swept over him and he declared, "The one for whom I have been waiting has come. He is a matchless spiritual stalwart whose name scholars were searching for in the shastras, but could not find. He is the one for whom even great sages and rishis were performing austerities to have his darshan in their *atma,* yet to them he has remained unattainable! He is the one who is immanently, living in the hearts of every living being. Today, as a teenager, with the name of Varni, he has come to redeem souls regardless of their calibre or bad nature."

Ramanand Swami experienced boundless joy. Tears of joy rolled down from his eyes. By nature he was always happy and radiated harmony. But even for a person like him the arrival of Varni at Loj was a special occasion and he was ecstatic. Nobody had ever seen him in such a happy mood.

Then he said, "Oh Varni! You are great! All my worries have now dissolved."

Ramanand Swami then addressed the assembly, "Devotees! Today is the most fortunate moment in our lives. Today is the most auspicious of days. The person for whom I have been waiting, through whom Bhagvat Dharma is to be established, through whom hundreds of thousands of souls are going to be liberated and become eligible to reside in Akshardham, that Varni Bhagwan has arrived at

Loj."

So saying he called a devotee and said, "Bring some sugar crystals." Ramanand Swami gave fistfuls of sugar crystals first to Mayaram Bhatt, saying, "Bhattji! You have brought happy news today. I am offering you only this small token but Varni will give you much more. He will bless you with supreme happiness." Then he personally distributed the sugar crystals to all.

On the following day Ramanand Swami wrote letters to Varni and Muktanand Swami and handed them over to Bhattji to be delivered at Loj. He told him, "Tell everybody in the villages en route that Varni has arrived at Loj and it is my order that people should go there for his darshan."

Bhattji prepared to leave. He packed his clothes, put on his headgear and placed his future-telling property in his bag. When Ramanand Swami saw this, he started laughing. Bhattji came near him and enquired, "Swami, why are you laughing?"

Ramanand Swami replied, "The one at whose behest the heavenly bodies move and who controls time has himself come. So next time if anybody inquires about their future don't refer to your future-telling equipment but ask Varni and give your reply."

Bhattji was a Brahmin. He had great faith in Ramanand Swami's words. He understood the significance of his guru's words and was about to throw away his future-telling property. But Ramanand stopped him, saying, "Bhattji! Don't throw it away. Varni himself will ask you to refer to it. Then at that time you should use it, but speak according to Varni's inclination. When you have to tell others then remember Varni before replying." Bhattji touched Ramanand Swami's feet. The latter blessed him and Bhattji set out on his journey back to Loj.

Mayaram Delivers Ramanand Swami's Letters

Mayaram Bhatt told the residents of villages he passed en route that Ramanand Swami had instructed everyone to go to Loj for Varni's darshan. Thus Ramanand Swami's message reached all the villages. People left whatever they were doing and rushed to Loj.

Bhattji arrived at Shekhpat. There he told Lalji Suthar, "Lalji, Swami has asked everyone to go to Loj. A great Varni has come there. Everybody should have his darshan. You should also come."

Lalji was an intelligent devotee. He had immense faith in Ramanand Swami. He felt that he could not abandon his guru, Ramanand Swami, to go and meet Varni, a stranger in Loj? The guru may say anything. He may even be testing his allegiance. So many wandering *brahmacharis* have come and gone. He told Mayaram, "You go. I shall come later."

Mayaram nodded and proceeded ahead with his bag hanging round his shoulders. He thought Lalji was not convinced. He also started having second thoughts. Varni had performed rigorous austerities. He has been reduced to a bag of bones. He no doubt has some mystic powers, but such miracles were also shown by Ramanand Swami. He made up his mind not to revere anyone other than Ramanand Swami even if anyone showed God in his palm. Then conflicting thoughts started racing through his mind. Varni has a handsome face that attracts everyone. Ramanand Swami also described the greatness of Varni. Mayaram trudged along, covering the distance and thinking, "It is true, that though Varni is young he is powerful like God."

Lost in such thoughts he soon reached Loj and handed over the letters to Muktanand Swami. Muktanand Swami opened both the letters, touched them to his

heart and started reading. The sadhus gathered around him. Ramanand Swami had written to Muktanand Swami: "Varni has come there. Take care of him. Whatever you have written about Varni is absolutely true. People will realise in future that Varni does not belong to this world. Let him teach *ashtang*-yoga to the sadhus. I shall come as soon as the month of April is over."

Lalji Suthar Goes to Bhuj

To Varni he had written: "Take care of yourself. You have a lot of work to accomplish with your physical body. Stay there for the time being. Don't be in a hurry to come here. Teach *ashtang*-yoga to the sadhus there. As you are eager for my darshan, so am I for yours. Still I have to undertake tours for the sake of *satsang* and in keeping the devotees happy."

In Shekhpat, Lalji Suthar became uneasy as he got more and more news about Varni's greatness. Who is this new Varni for whose darshan so many people are flocking to Loj? When they have a competent guru such as Ramanand Swami why are people going to others? What happened to the intellect of the devotees who considered it a sin even to think of a guru other than Ramanand Swami? What is happening to Satsang? He could not think further. He considered it better to go to Bhuj and ask Swami, "What is this hocus-pocus?"

So, Lalji set out for Bhuj on his self-appointed mission.

Ramanand Swami was surprised to see Lalji. He wondered why Lalji, who was ever eager to obey every order of his, had come to him instead of going to Loj? He asked Lalji, "Did Mayaram Bhatt not convey the message?"

Lalji replied unhappily, "Yes, he had given the message. But Swami, what is this new development? All the people are making a beeline for Loj. Is the Varni so great?"

Ramanand Swami checked Lalji and said sternly, "Lalji, you have made a big mistake. Instead of going to Loj for Varni's darshan why did you rush here?"

Lalji was a bit perplexed. Yet he gathered enough courage to ask Ramanand Swami, "But Swami! how great is this Varni? Is he like Dattatrey, Rishabhdev or Ramchandra?"

Ramanand Swami wondered as to whether he should explain such a great thing to Lalji. Then he felt he must reveal the truth. He began, "Lalji! Just as Krishna is greater than Rishabhdev, Dattatrey and Ramachandra this Varni is greater than even Krishna."

Lalji was lost in thought. Sensing his confusion Ramanand Swami said, "In your attachment to the guru if you fail to recognise the manifest God, then it will hinder your redemption."

Lalji Meets Sarjudas

Lalji obeyed Ramanand Swami's command by leaving for Loj. When he reached the village within a few days, Nilkanth was sitting at a step well in Loj. Varni was taking an Ayurvedic preparation along with chillies. When Lalji Suthar reached the ashram he got news that Sarjudas was sitting near the step well. He at once went there.

Sarjudas was looking straight at the tip of his nose and meditating on his own divine form. Lalji prostrated before him. As soon as he saw Varni's emaciated body, his senses were at once drawn towards him! He realised that Varni was exactly what Ramanand Swami had described him to be. He came near him and bowed at his feet in reverence. Sarjudas was still in meditation.

Within a short time he opened his eyes and saw Lalji. He smiled at him. Lalji

took the smile to be a sign of recognition of his previous births. Sarjudas placed his hand on Lalji's head and said, "The streak of unnecessary compassion in your detachment had caused an obstacle in your path of redemption. But in this birth your detachment will bear fruit. You will become a great renunciant like Shukdevji."

These words of Sarjudas sounded divine to Lalji and revealed him as one possessing divine vision. He felt as if he had known him since many births.

After a little while Varni got up. Lalji too got up and both of them went to the mandir. Lalji met Muktanand Swami and told him of what Ramanand had said about Varni. He spoke of his experience with Sarjudas and the blessings which were full of deep meaning. Muktanand Swami realised that Varni's personality had touched Lalji's heart. Muktanand Swami experienced Sarjudas' greatness almost everyday yet this influence of Sarjudas on Lalji amazed him. He mentally bowed to Varni.

In the evening Sarjudas picked up the *kavad* and went to beg for alms.

There is a river between the village of Loj and Shil. After returning from begging for alms Sarjudas would sit on its banks for a little while to perform yogic exercises. While walking he would sometimes stumble because of his frail body and the exertion after his exercises. Sometimes he would dash against a tree or stone as he always used to look down while walking. So Muktanand Swami had appointed two merchant devotees, Devabhai and Jethabhai, to be in constant attendance on him. When Sarjudas returned to the mandir in the evening, Lalji Suthar had left for Shekhpat.

Muktanand Swami took Sarjudas with him wherever he went. Once he had to visit Kalvani. He took Sarjudas with him. Devabhai and Jethabhai accompa-

nied them. There were other sadhus too. At Kalvani Rajabhai and Parvatbhai, who were devoted to Ramanand Swami, came. Other devotees had also come. Because of their association with Muktanand Swami their piety had become stronger.

In Kalvani Sarjudas would take the sadhus to a garden and make them meditate. He would move around to keep them alert. He would take care so that they concentrated while meditating, their minds did not go astray, and they did not doze off. If he found anybody dozing he would wake him up and say, "Sadhuram! God has come to you in the guise of Ramanand Swami. Still why are you not able to concentrate on his form and, instead, lapse into dozing? So far I have not even had the darshan of Ramanand Swami. Even then I am alert and am unable to sleep at night." With these words he would alert the sadhus and teach them how to meditate.

Miracle at Lojpur

Muktanand Swami was meditating and Sarjudas came to him and sat in front of him. After a while Muktanand Swami opened his eyes and saw Sarjudas sitting before him. Muktanand Swami welcomed him. Sarjudas asked him, "Swami! What did you see while you were meditating?"

Muktanand Swami replied, "Sarjudasji! What one sees in meditation should be kept a secret."

On hearing this Sarjudas smiled and said, "Swami! Shall I tell you what you have seen?" After this Sarjudas narrated the train of thoughts that Muktanand Swami had experienced while in dhyan. Muktanand Swami was greatly surprised. Then Sarjudas asked, "Swami! Is dhyan *sagun* (*mayik*) or *nirgun* (divine)?"

Muktanand Swami replied, "As one is associated with God in dhyan it is *nirgun.*"

Hearing this Sarjudas smiled. He asked, "Swami! how can dhyan be called *nirgun* when your mind is on guard against a dog from spoiling your water gourd?"

Muktanand Swami was left speechless. He looked in amazement at Sarjudas! He found Sarjudas to be more powerful than his guru, Ramanand Swami. But at once he shook his head when this thought came to mind. To think that anybody is superior to the guru causes impediments in guru bhakti and in the achievement of the fruits of one's spiritual endeavours. The very thought is pernicious. Yet mentally he adored Sarjudas.

Once the sadhus had made their water gourds very attractive by applying colour. Sarjudas asked them to bring them to him and he made them rough by dashing the rim against a stone. The sadhus felt dejected when he did this but nobody had the courage to protest. Then he told the sadhus, "By applying colour you have made these water gourds so attractive that your mind will be attracted towards them. Sadhus should make do with whatever things that are available and not have things which create infatuation."

Muktanand Swami understood the essence of his words. His mind was also once attracted to his water gourd while meditating. Addressing the sadhus he said, "Sadhus! What Sarjudas has said is very true. I too had developed infatuation one day. We should spend every second of our life in thinking of God, that is our sole goal. But if we forget him and begin to think of worldly things then we will face obstacles in our spiritual endeavours."

Sarjudas Sees Ramanand Swami

After Muktanand Swami returned to Loj, Sarjudas told him, "Swami! help me

have the darshan of Ramanand Swami once, then we will both go to the forest and spend our lives meditating on God."

Muktanand Swami also liked what the young Brahmachari was saying. His personality is so divine that all the *jivas* who would come into contact with him would be redeemed. So, anyhow he must be retained here. His words and his conduct would revive the noble qualities in the sadhus which were on the wane.

The month of May was over and June had set in, yet there was no news about Ramanand Swami. Muktanand Swami could see traces of sadness on Sarjudas' face. He was worried lest Sarjudas would go away. With each passing day Sarjudas would sigh deeply. Muktanand Swami thought that like the baked earth during the hot summer which turns cool with the monsoon rains, Nilkanth Varni's heart will soothen with Ramanand Swami's darshan. The land of Sorath had countless spiritual souls on its soil waiting to be blessed by Varni. Muktanand Swami was lost in thought.

Nine months had passed since Nilkanth Varni's arrival in Loj. Muktanand Swami's assurance to Varni was over. So Varni asked Muktanand Swami, "Swami! Nine months have passed but Ramanand Swami has not come yet. My soul is yearning for his darshan. My mind is growing restless."

Muktanand Swami knew that Ramanand Swami would take some more time in coming to Sorath. So he felt helplessness. After thinking for some time he said, "Sarjudas, the guru is not bound by time or place. He might have stayed somewhere to fulfil a devotee's wish or he might be putting your eagerness to test."

Sarjudas agreed, but his soul was restless for the darshan of his guru. All of a sudden Sarjudas said to Muktanand Swami, "Swami! You once said that when you perform puja, guru Ramanand Swami comes in person and accepts the offerings."

Muktanand Swami said, "Yes, he comes daily."

Nilkanth smiled. "Tomorrow when you are doing puja I shall sit by your side," he said. Muktanand Swami did not understand this. He thought, "If it pleases the young Varni, then fine."

Next morning when Muktanand Swami began his puja Sarjudas sat beside him. Muktanand Swami sat in meditation. He used to have darshan of Ramanand Swami while in meditation. With his yogic powers Sarjudas linked his mind with that of Muktanand Swami's. Sarjudas was able to have darshan of Ramanand Swami who had mentally presented himself in person before Muktanand Swami. He had an impressive personality. He was fair-skinned, well-built, lotus-eyed, had a prominent nose and a broad forehead. Sarjudas really felt happy on seeing such a divine figure. He had a sober face. There was the love of Krishna in his eyes. Sarjudas recollected the form of Ramanand Swami as described by his father, Dharmadev, at the time of his last breath. Varni thought Ramanand Swami looked every inch a guru.

When Muktanand Swami came out of meditation he saw tears of joy in Sarjudas' eyes. Sarjudas told him, "I have had the darshan of Ramanand Swami." Then Varni gave a graphic description of Ramanand Swami. The sadhus of the ashram were greatly dumbfounded by the exact description!

One of the sadhus asked, "Sarjudas, are you at peace, now?"

Spontaneously Sarjudas answered, "The glory of the darshan of the manifest form is much more than the glory of mental darshan. God has two forms: manifest and non-manifest."

Only one who has realised the knowledge of the manifest form of God and who sees him face to face can attain moksha. Varni wished to proclaim this essence from

the holy Hindu shastras to the world.

Kurji Dave Brings Good Tidings

On the evening of Monday, 16 June 1800 (A.S. 1856, Jeth *vad* 10), Kurji Dave brought a message from Piplana. Everybody was happy on seeing him and became eager to know what the message was. The sadhus sat around the Brahmin. Muktanand Swami asked, "Daveji! What news have you brought?"

"It is good news, Swami," Kurji Dave replied.

"Then do not keep us waiting!" said Sukhanand Swami impatiently.

When the Brahmin saw the restlessness of the sadhus to hear the news, he deliberately delayed giving the message and asked them, "What will you give me if I relate the good news?"

Sukhanand Swami was a bit irritated and said, "The gift depends on what type of news you have brought."

He saw the intense devotion of the sadhus for their guru. He declared, "Swami! Ramanand Swami has arrived in Piplana this morning. He has invited all of you there and also said to bring Sarjudas with you."

Everyone was immensely happy at the good tidings. Muktanand Swami gave his *pagh* in appreciation to Kurji Dave. Other sadhus also gave him whatever they had.

Nilkanth Varni was watching all this. He was very much delighted. But he had not a single thing to offer to Kurji Dave. So he said, "Daveji! I give you my Akshardham as a gift."

Dave was confused as he did not know what this meant. He simply looked expectantly at Nilkanth Varni. Nilkanth Varni again told him, "Daveji! I will give you what nobody can give you, my supreme Akshardham! It is difficult to

attain and even great sages have worn out their bodies in rigorous austerities for it."

Kurji stood expressionless. But he felt that what Nilkanth Varni had promised to offer will be priceless compared to the other gifts. He offered his *pranams* to Nilkanth Varni.

Sarjudas said to Muktanand Swami and the other sadhus, "Come, let us leave right now." To please Nilkanth everybody agreed and left immediately. In Kalvani they had dinner. Thereafter Nilkanth Varni said, "Swami, let us move now!"

Muktanand Swami said, "It is the tenth day of the dark half of the lunar month. We will move after the moon rises."

Sarjudas did not like the delay. He said, "The moon is not eager for Ramanand Swami's darshan. So let us all move."

Swami understood the impatience on the part of Sarjudas. He said, "We shall leave shortly. Parvatbhai and the other devotees are also coming. So, we will leave together."

Meanwhile, Parvatbhai, Ambaram Vyas, Jivaram Soni, Khimji Sheth and other devotees came. The moon by then appeared in the night sky. And all of them set out on the journey. After walking for a short distance, Nilkanth suddenly sat down. "My feet are hurting. Someone please massage them." The sadhus sat around him and started pressing his feet. Seeing this, Sadhu Ayodhyadas, a giant of a sadhu who was formerly a wrestler of Ayodhya, said, "What is this. Why have you sat down like a weakling! Sit on my shoulders. I will carry you."

Responding to his uncouth manners, Sarjudas smiled and said, "Sadhuram! You will not be able to carry me."

On hearing this, Ayodhyadas burst out laughing. He picked up Sarjudas with

one hand, sat him on his shoulder and started walking. After a little while, Ayodhyadas felt that Sarjudas was too heavy for him to carry. His speed decreased. He walked a little and then sat down. He told Varni, "Sarju! get down. You are too heavy." Everyone started laughing on hearing this.

Sarjudas walked for a while and sat down once again. He said, "My body is aching. Please massage my body." So the sadhus began to massage his body.

In the meantime Muktanand Swami came there. He said to Sarjudas, "What are you doing? Sometimes you are sitting on somebody's shoulder and at other times you are asking the sadhus to press your body. If you go on like this when will you reach Piplana? It is a long way off. Why don't you use your yogic powers."

Sarjudas got up as soon as he heard Muktanand Swami's words. Ramanand Swami had directed him to follow Muktanand's instructions. So, he shed his fatigue, employed his yogic powers and shot on his way as speedily as an arrow discharged from a bow. The sadhus simply looked on with amazement.

Sarjudas came to the bank of the Ojhat Ganga which was in flood. The waters were flowing in torrents and it was not possible for anybody to cross it. Yet Varni jumped into the water and reached the other bank by walking on it. People on both sides of the river bank looked on with amazement at Nilkanth's miracle. After reaching the other bank he waited for the other sadhus to join him.

Everybody was waiting for the boats to sail. When the rains subsided the boats started sailing across the river. All the sadhus and devotees sat in the boat and reached the opposite bank. Nilkanth Varni was sitting there waiting for their arrival. Everybody was a witness, on one hand, to the weakness shown by Nilkanth and, on

the other hand, his supernatural powers. He got up when all came near. Though he had visited Piplana before he entered it, out of courtesy, alongwith the group members.

12. Nilkanth Meets Ramanand Swami

1800-1801

Wednesday, 18 June 1800 (A.S. 1856, Jeth *vad* 12), was an auspicious and memorable day in the Swaminarayan calendar. Sarjudas, whom guru Ramanand Swami considered as God and as the key person in Satsang, had arrived in Piplana. It was a day for the auspicious meeting of devotee and God. God was impatient to meet his devotee so with his yogic powers he had increased his speed. He had dived into the flooded Ojhat. The devotee, Ramanand Swami, too, was equally eager to meet Nilkanth. The guru had left his numerous devotees in Kutch and came to Piplana for the memorable event. Then, upon arrival in Piplana he immediately sent Kurji Dave to Loj with the message. Ramanand Swami was awaiting Nilkanth Varni and the sadhus' arrival at Narsinh Mehta's house. Seated before him in an assembly was a congregation of devotees.

Someone gave the news that Muktanand Swami and the sadhus had entered Piplana. Ramanand came down from his seat and was visibly eager to meet them. Soon, the group came into view. Varni was at the head of the group. On seeing Ramanand Swami standing by his seat, Nilkanth started prostrating from a distance. Ramanand Swami came running towards him, lifted him and lovingly

embraced him. Everybody was surprised. They had not seen Swami receive anyone like this before. Today he met Nilkanth in a unique manner. The great love and affection he had for Varni was evident from his eyes and voice.

After releasing Nilkanth from his embrace, Ramanand Swami made Nilkanth sit on a seat before him. Then he received the salutations of Muktanand Swami and other sadhus and put his hands on their heads as a sign of benediction. Ramanand Swami also blessed the accompanying devotees and enquired of their wellbeing. All the while he looked at Nilkanth. He found Varni as he had been described by Muktanand Swami in his letter. Veins were showing on his dry body. Blue, yellow and green veins were adding beauty to his body like a rainbow. His personality radiated with divinity. The glitter in his eyes reflected strength to defeat *maya*! His face mirrored his soft mind which became tender at the devotion of devotees.

Muktanand Swami noticed that although Ramanand Swami was meeting and blessing other sadhus and devotees, he was constantly looking at Sarjudas. Many times Ramanand Swami had gone to Kutch and other places and on returning met sadhus and devotees; but Muktanand Swami had never before seen the joy he was witnessing today on the face of Ramanand Swami. From that only he could make out the greatness of Nilkanth Varni.

That day happened to be Yogini Ekadashi. Ramanand Swami got fruits for Varni as it was a day of fast. Looking at Varni, Ramanand Swami thought that his face was familiar. So he asked him, "Varni! From your face it appears I know you. Who are your parents? And where do you come from?"

Varni gave him the details. Ramanand Swami was happy on learning of Varni's parents and said, "Varni your parents were my disciples. We met at Prayag. They

took Vaishnavi *diksha* from me. So you are mine."

One of the assembled sadhus asked, "Swami, is this the same Varni for whom you have been waiting and whom you have described as the director of the play?"

Ramanand Swami said, "Yes, he is the same Varni! It is your good fortune he has met you today. However, when you realise his true glory you will experience boundless joy."

Varni at once put a question to Ramanand Swami, "Is your divinity eternal or has it been attained through spiritual endeavours?"

On hearing the question, Swami averted his gaze. He turned to the devotees seated nearby and started talking to them.

After some time when he looked at Varni, he repeated the question. But Ramanand Swami remained silent. So Varni asked the same question for the third time. Then Ramanand Swami got up on some pretext and left the place. He returned after some time. After that Varni remained silent.

Meanwhile, a Muslim police officer came there. Nilkanth Varni blessed him with samadhi. The officer saw Nilkanth seated on a splendid throne and Ramanand Swami alongwith other *muktas* praying to him.

After some time he came out of the samadhi and expressed his surprise to Ramanand Swami. "What is this embarrassing tradition among you Hindus? Allah sits on a lower seat and the disciple sits on a higher seat."

On hearing this Ramanand Swami said with a smile, "That is our true tradition. Vasisth Rishi used to sit on a higher seat whereas Shri Ram used to occupy a lower one."

The Muslim officer could not understand this. He took Nilkanth to be God, touched his feet and went away.

Everybody was preparing to go to the river Ojhat for a bath at around 4 pm. Ramanand Swami also took Mulji Bhakta and Lalji Suthar, who had come specially for Nilkanth Varni's darshan from Bhadra and Shekhpat, respectively. He told the devotees, "Get the musical band. Today is an auspicious day. We want to go to the Ojhat while singing bhajans to the accompaniment of the band."

Everybody realised that Swami was in a different mood today. The band came. The sadhus and devotees got ready. Preceding them were *shehnai* players, drummers, the cymbal players and sadhus singing *kirtans*. In this festive manner they went to the river bank. With his eyes cast down Varni was walking with Ramanand Swami. The guru was holding one of Varni's hands and the other he had placed on his shoulder. Everyone sang bhajans while going towards the river Ojhat, and at the same time all were continually looking at Nilkanth Varni.

The congregation soon reached the river bank. Ramanand Swami, Muktanand Swami and Varni started bathing in the eastward stream. Ramanand Swami said, "Just as people bathe after performing a *yagna* (called *Avabhruth snan*) today we have met Nilkanth Varni thereby we have completed a *yog-yagna*. So, this is not an ordinary bath we are taking but an *Avabhruth snan*."

Ramanand Swami decided to spend the four holy months (chaturmas) in Piplana. There, they celebrated Devpodhi Ekadashi, Janmashtmi and Jal Jhilani festivals of Ashadhi Samvat 1857 (August 1800). A steady stream of devotees continued to arrive for Nilkanth's darshan. They felt as if Ramanand Swami's personality was eclipsed by Varni's resplendence. Ramanand Swami too wished to be in the shadow of the youthful Brahmachari.

The Dashera and Annakut festivals were also celebrated in Piplana.

The Prabodhini Ekadashi of S.Y. 1857 (October 1800) was not far off. In his

travels to the pilgrim spots of the country if the thought of settling down ever occurred to Varni, it was here. Here there was dharma, saintliness, and activities for liberation. The sadhus here were ever desirous of seeking the true path. The devotees were truly eager to attain moksha. Everybody's moral conduct was within the limits prescribed by the shastras. Elsewhere he had seen fake dharma and fraudulent practices. He witnessed true religion being practised by the sadhus of Ramanand Swami. Varni decided to take Bhagvati *diksha* from Ramanand Swami.

Bhagvati Diksha to Nilkanth Varni

It was a resplendent morning on the auspicious day of Kartik Shukla Prabodhini *ekadashi* of Ashadhi Samvat 1857 (Tuesday, 28 October 1800). Varni completed his morning ablutions, went to the river bank alongwith sadhus and took his bath. He wore white clothes and then entered the *yagna* hall. The learned Brahmins placed the auspicious *kalashas* (pots) in eight directions and installed the deities. Then they told Varni to worship the deities. After that he performed oblations by pouring ghee in the *yagna kund*.

Then Ramanand Swami started the procedure to administer Bhagvati *diksha* to Varni. He first gave the young Brahmachari a *kaupin* (loin cloth). Then a white cloth to wear as a dhoti. And finally an upper cloth to cover his upper body. He placed a double stringed *kanthi* made of tulsi beads around his neck. He applied an *urdhvapundra tilak* and round kumkum *chandlo* on his forehead. He imprinted his arms and chest with the auspicious marks and uttered the guru mantra in his ear.

Then Ramanand Swami said, "Varni, you are an absolute celibate by birth.

Nobody knows Brahma like you know. Bravo to your total detachment! You are God incarnate. Even without initiation you are competent enough to burn the sins of billions simply by your wish. Yet to spread the essence of Vedic Dharma you have accepted initiation today!"

In this way after administering Bhagvati *diksha,* Ramanand Swami completed the name-giving ceremony. He gave two names to Varni, 'Sahajanand Swami' and 'Narayan Muni'. After the ceremony was over Varni got up, prostrated before Ramanand Swami and touched his feet. He also touched the feet of Muktanand Swami and the other sadhus. Varni, the youngest among the sadhus of the congregation, looked magnificent today.

The entire congregation of devotees, Ramanand Swami and the other sadhus were absorbed in the darshan of the newly initiated sadhu, Sahajanand Swami. They did not know why their concentration strayed from Ramanand Swami. The guru's thoughts were lost in the encounter he had with Bhaktimata and Dharmadev at Prayag. He learnt from his sadhus that Sahajanand Swami has an immense liking for dharma, is insistent on *brahmacharya* and is keen to establish it among sadhus at Loj. He was amazed with the stories he heard about Nilkanth. Though Sahajanand Swami himself was God he showed an earnest desire for spiritual devotion.

Ramdas Swami Joins Ramanand Swami

Ramanand Swami was lost in deep thought about himself. God had given him darshan and told him that he himself would manifest on earth and establish Bhagvat Dharma. He pondered over the purity of the soil of Sorath. He reminisced about the outskirts of Saring village in the Kanam region in which he saw

a peasant ploughing his field with yoked bullocks. He hailed the peasant and told him, "Brother, this world is temporary. Why then are you wasting your precious human life on this useless pursuit?" The peasant did not understand the question or the message. He looked up and said with folded hands, "Then what should I do?" "Renounce all worldly cares and worship God. Come with me." The peasant at once set down the reins which secured the bullocks and followed him.

At this point someone shook Ramanand Swami, "Swami, Swami!"

Ramanand Swami came out of his reverie with a start. "Who, Ramdas!"

"Yes, Swami what were you thinking?"

Swami smiled and said, "I was thinking about you. You left the bullocks and came with me. What a strong spiritual inclination you have."

He said, "Swami, before this Narayan Muni's austerities and detachment, I am nothing. The source of all beneficial qualities is God. It looks as if this Sahajanand is God, doesn't it?"

Ramanand Swami smiled and said, "Ramdas! Sahajanand Swami cannot be fathomed. You shall see his greatness in future."

Ramanand Swami made Sahajanand Swami sit near him and instructed him, "Swami! You have taken *bhagvati diksha* today and have accepted the philosophy of our Sampraday. Now you have to propagate it."

On hearing this Muktanand Swami said, "Swami! his heart is filled with the knowledge of the same philosophy. The first questions he asked me after setting foot in our ashram were regarding *jiva, ishwar, maya,* Brahma and Parabrahma."

Ramanand Swami looked at Sahajanand Swami after hearing this and smiled approvingly.

Sahajanand Swami thought that it was not the proper time for a philosophical discussion. When the spiritually inclined will realise the oneness his Akshardham has with himself, they will understand the glory of Akshar and accept the necessity and importance of Aksharbrahma for ultimate liberation. At this point it was difficult even to make people understand that he is the supreme God. They have faith only in past avatars and worship them sincerely.

So, to change the subject, he asked Anandanand Swami of Ayodhya, "Swami! how did you happen to come here all the way from the north?"

Anand Swami replied, "In Ayodhya there is a Ramgalola Akhada."

Narayan Muni laughed on hearing this. He said, "I know it. I had been to the Akhada. All the sadhus there were indulging in addictions and sense pleasures."

"I was one of them," Anand Swami replied with a smile. "But, because of my past deeds and Ramanand Swami's grace, I and a group of sadhus embarked on a pilgrimage to Dwarika. While we arrived in Saurashtra we heard Ramanand Swami's name on everyone's lips. On hearing his name I was attracted towards him. I went in search of him and found him at Loj. I felt blessed with inner tranquility after having his darshan. Although I was a sannyasi, my senses were inclined towards worldly pleasures. But after meeting Ramanand Swami this craving was pacified!

"I felt that if I wanted to become a true sadhu and realise God then, instead of undertaking pilgrimages to Kashi, Kedar, Dwarika, etc. it would be better to be at the feet of a great soul like Ramanand Swami at whose feet lie the sixty-eight pilgrim places! So I considered Dwarika to be here and thus settled down, while my companions proceeded ahead. By Swami's grace I have become Anandanand from Lakshmandas. But as I originally came from Ramgalola Akhada, I am also called

Ramgalola Anandanand."

Then Ramanand Swami got up and addressed the sadhus, "The aim with which we had started almshouses for the needy in Loj, Mangrol, Manavadar, Agatrai, Meghpur, Dhoraji, Sankli, Piplana, Jamvali, Bhader, Faneni, Jetpur, Sardhar, etc. has been fulfilled. Our aspiration for redemption when God in the form of a mendicant comes for seeking food has been fulfilled. This Sahajanand Swami is that mendicant. Also, there is harassment from the wayward ascetics too. So let us discontinue our almshouses." Thus, almshouses were closed.

Mukund Brahmachari, one of the disciples of Ramanand Swami was looking constantly at Sahajanand Swami. He was drinking the unique personality of Sahajanand Swami with his eyes. Whenever he spoke Mukund Brahmachari would listen in rapt attention. Seeing his intense concentration, a sadhu once shook him and said, "Mukund! Did you understand anything?"

Mukund replied, "Who wants to understand? I am merely looking at him. What a divine form! What uniqueness he has!"

The former Brahmin youth from Machhiyav (Mulji) who was observing absolute celibacy, had rebelled against the very thought of marriage and set out in search of God. After leaving home, he came to Loj searching for God. Here, in Ramanand Swami, he saw God. He focused his senses within and spent his time at the ashram singing the praises of God and in the service of the fellow residents. Impressed with the devotion of Mulji, Ramanand Swami gave him *diksha* and named him Mukund Brahmachari.

Everyone remained engaged in doing bhajan till 12 midnight because it was Ekadashi. All were happy in their hearts because God who resided within was manifest before them. Though they had not realised his true form, they still experienced

the bliss of that form.

HARBAI AND VALBAI

Next day in the morning all the sadhus bathed in the Ojhat. Then they performed their daily rituals. Ramanand Swami sat with Sahajanand Swami and broke the fast. He was constantly thinking of Sahajanand Swami's health. His body was no better than a bag of bones because of the intense austerities he had performed. Despite this Sahajanand Swami was a light eater. Even that day he took only a little and rinsed his mouth. Ramanand Swami, too, got up.

Ramanand Swami followed Sahajanand. He put his hands on his shoulders and said, "Muni! You seem to be troubled by something."

"There is nothing wrong with me, but there is one question," Narayan Muni replied in a low tone.

Ramanand Swami was a bit perplexed. Only yesterday he took *diksha* and what could be bothering him he thought! He said, "Say it without hesitation. I shall then find a solution."

Narayan Muni said, "Swami in our ashram there are two women who are dressed in the garb of sadhus. Who are they? Do we give *diksha* to women? Do we permit women to remain in contact with sadhus in our ashram?"

Ramanand Swami was dumbfounded by these questions of Sahajanand Swami. He replied, "Swami! These women, Harbai and Valbai, are the disciples of Atmanand Swami. He entrusted them to my care with the rest of his disciples. They have been moving with me ever since."

Sahajanand Swami continued with his questions, "Did Atmanand Swami give these women *diksha*?"

"No. Atmanand Swami did not give them *diksha.* But while Valbai was on a pilgrimage to Kashi with him, she herself put on the saffron clothes at Lathi village. And Harbai donned the saffron clothes after hearing the discourses of Atmanand Swami."*

On hearing Ramanand Swami's words Sahajanand Swami snapped his fingers and uttered the words 'Hari, Hari, Hari'. The guru noted the expression on his face and said, "Swami! I know what is in your mind. But let it pass for now. When the time comes everything will be resolved."

Sahajanand Swami knew very well that if he brought any pressure, it would create unnecessary discontent among Ramanand Swami's disciples. So, for the time being, he was satisfied with Ramanand Swami's words.

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* Govind Swami (a Tailangi Brahmin) who lived at Gopnath Mahadev near Talaja had two disciples. One of them was Anandanand and another Narsinh Mehta, a Nagar devotee of Junagadh. Anandanand's disciple was Gopalanand and his in turn was Atmanand of Dhuvav village. Before initiation Atmanand was a Modh Chaturvedi Brahmin called Vishvambhar Bhatt. His parents were Jagjivan and Nanbai. He was married when he was 20 and had four sons and one daughter – Gopi Bhatt, Bhanu Bhatt, Jaidev, Atmaram and Anandibai. After listening to a discourse by Gopalanand, Vishvambhar nursed a feeling of renunciation for the world. He went to live at Asodar and sustained himself on alms. There, Valbai, a daughter of one of the alms givers saw godliness in him and expressed her desire to stay with him.
Vishvambhar Bhatt promised, "When I go for pilgrimage I shall take you and you can bathe in the Ganga." After this encounter, he returned to Gopnath. It was there that his guru, Gopalanand, gave him diksha and named him Atmanand Swami. On his return to Asodar, he thought of undertaking the pilgrimage to Kashi in the company of Valbai as he had promised. Valbai sought the permission of her parents and relatives and set out on the pilgrimage. On the way, at Lathi village, she put on the saffron clothes.
She met Harbai, a potter woman from Nagher, at Kashi. The latter was disgusted with the conduct of fake sadhus at the akhada there. She had come with a desire to find God either in the sadhus or at the pilgrim place. But she was disappointed. Meanwhile she met Valbai. They became friends as they were from the same region and spoke the same language. Harbai narrated her experiences. Valbai told the glory of her guru Atmanand Swami. So Harbai listened to the discourses of Atmanand Swami and she, too, put on the saffron robes.
That Atmanand Swami was Ramanand Swami's guru. But Ramanand Swami left him when Atmanand

Travellings in Sorath

After celebrating Kartik Purnima at Piplana, Ramanand Swami decided to leave with his sadhus. This made everybody unhappy. For over five and a half months the guru provided unalloyed bliss to the devotees and now he was going away. Ramanand Swami assured everybody, "Remember the bliss you have experienced till now. Remember this Varni. He is God." Saying this he took Sahajanand Swami and both of them sat in a chariot. Muktanand Swami and the other sadhus sat in bullock carts. Some rode on horses, while others walked. Narsinh Mehta and son, Kalyanji, together with the devotees of the village came to bid farewell to the sadhus. They went up to the outskirts of the village when Ramanand Swami asked them to turn back. Ramanand Swami and his entourage proceeded towards Akha.

At Akha, the entourage came to the house of a Brahmin named Gangadhar. There was a pipal tree in the spacious compound of his mansion. Ramanand Swami camped under the tree alongwith Sahajanand Swami. The sadhus and devotees also assembled there. Ramanand Swami had made it a custom to hold an assembly as soon as he reached any village. The assembly would include singing of bhajans and discourses. This helped to pacify the minds of people from worldly desires and impious thoughts and the atmosphere would become suffused with divinity. Thereafter the intellect would sharpen by the spiritual association of sadhus. An inner awakening would allow the preachings to be internalised. It was a wonderful means of doing *satsang*.

Swami preached that God is formless. Ramanand Swami then took Ramanuji diksha, went to Vrindavan and realised Krishna and then came to Sorath. There he ran into his former guru at Chhatrasa village. Atmanand Swami recognised the effulgence that was emanating from Ramanand's face. He proved the superiority of Vishitadvaita philosophy and Atmanand Swami accepted defeat gracefully. Not only that he handed over all his disciples to Ramanand Swami. He ordered Harbai and Valbai to stay under Ramanand Swami.

A local villager called Jasul had come in the assembly. While he was listening to the discourse he became absorbed in the personality of Sahajanand Swami and went into samadhi. He became unconscious! However, one could feel his pulse. Everybody looked at him in amazement. But as Ramanand Swami was delivering discourses nobody disturbed the proceedings. In a short while Jasul regained consciousness. He rushed to Ramanand Swami, bowed to Sahajanand Swami and said, "This Sahajanand is God himself. I have just witnessed his divine form."

All those gathered there listened with wonder to his account. They also felt that Sahajanand Swami's personality was attracting them towards him. Meanwhile it was time for the assembly to disperse and so Sahajanand Swami also got up.

They all took food at Gangadhar's house. Then some devotees came from Agatrai village and requested Ramanand Swami, "Swami, this new Varni has not visited our place. So all of you come to our village."

Ramanand Swami called Muktanand Swami at once and told him, "You take Varni and go to Agatrai with the devotees. I shall come there tomorrow."

On hearing Swami's order, the sadhus got ready and left the place after taking lunch. Sahajanand Swami went with them. The devotees of Akha walked to the outskirts of the village to bid farewell to the sadhus. All eyes were on Sahajanand Swami's emaciated body. All of a sudden they witnessed a cool glow issuing from it. After some time it merged with his form. All were surprised at this unique phenomenon.

Muktanand Swami told the devotees, "Now you may go back."

But they were drawn by Sahajanand Swami's magnetic personality. They felt as if they would not be able to leave Varni and go back. Muktanand Swami understood

their predicament and said, "Why are you so dejected? Ramanand Swami is there with you. Contemplate on his form."

Jiva, Purush, Akshar, Purushottam – the light in all these are of similar content. It is extremely difficult to differentiate them, but there is a vast difference. Muktanand Swami had not experienced the distinction. And hence he advised, "All of you go home and concentrate on Ramanand Swami's form."

The distinction in the glow is understood only by God's grace. Today the devotees were attracted by the newly-initiated Varni. Their minds were fixed on his form. They were unwilling to leave his presence. Muktanand Swami could not perceive that fact. He forgot the words asked by Varni to Ramanand Swami in Piplana, "Is your divinity eternal or has it been attained through spiritual endeavours?" To get over the resolves that one has before he has met God or the God-realised Sadhu is very difficult. That was Muktanand Swami's predicament!

The sadhus and devotees reached Agatrai. Bhimbhai and Parvatbhai received them most cordially. Everybody was happy on having the darshan of Sahajanand Swami. Ramanand Swami came the next day. He stayed at Bhimbhai's house. In the assembly held there, he repeatedly told Parvatbhai and Bhimbhai that the Varni is God.

Parvatbhai became convinced of this as he had faith in what his guru said.

Everyday Ramanand Swami would go to Parvatbhai's farm and hold an assembly under a sprawling mango tree. There, Ramanand Swami would sit on a high seat and Narayan Muni on a low seat. But the strange thing was that everybody's mind became focused on Nilkanth Varni. Ramanand Swami was extremely pleased by this.

They stayed at Agatrai for five days; moved on to Jetha Mer's house at

Madhada and finally came to Kalvani. They stayed there at a dharmashala established by Ramanand Swami. It was his intention to spend two to three months here. On seeing Varni's frail frame tears would come to his eyes. He wondered as to how his frail body would stand upto the demands of Satsang? There was not a drop of perspiration on his body, as he could not tolerate heat. Therefore some remedy had to be tried. He started repairing the damage in earnest. Varni's body was rubbed with wax oil. He was given the best musk available in the market to eat. Even then there was no heat in his body. Then his body was tightly tied with bandages made from tanner's cassia *(aval)*. But as there was not enough blood how could his body generate heat!

Ramanand Swami left no stone unturned to nurse Varni back to health. Finally, he served Varni with balls made of green chillies. But he had travelled in summer, in winter and in torrential rain, too. He had subjected his body to the vagaries of weather in such a manner that the skin on his body had become harsh. He was alive only by his own will.

Ramanand Swami was greatly moved by the rigour with which Varni had practiced his austerities. Varni was God manifest in human form. He had manifested just for the final liberation of mankind. Yet to inspire them and to give them the strength to adopt the means to please God, he had undergone such rigorous austerities.

What a deep desire to redeem souls! To spread real kindness, pure compassion and to let the souls know of their true responsibility was his aim. For two months Ramanand Swami arranged treatments to improve the physical well-being of Varni's worn-out body. Swami decided to celebrate the spring festival (Vasantotsav) there.

The Vasant Panchmi festival of Monday, 19 January 1801 (A.S. 1857) was celebrated in the presence of Sahajanand Swami at Kalvani. Ramanand Swami sang a selection from the devout compositions of the eight Vaishnav poets and also of Tulsidas. He was engrossed in devotion to Shri Krishna. But while singing, whenever his eyes fell on Sahajanand Swami, he felt that Varni is Krishna in manifest form and that he was searching for him within!

After the Vasantotsav Swami stayed for 15 days at Mangrol. Then he left with the sadhus for Loj. Here, too, Ramanand Swami used to bind Sahajanand Swami's body with *aval* leaves to improve his condition. At this the jealous Raghunathdas would tell the people, "Ramanand Swami is defoliating the surroundings to bandage the body of a youth from Ayodhya. He is committing violence to green plants."

To this Ramanand Swami would reply, "The Varni is so great that even if I were to use all living beings in the universe to bandage Varni's body, it would not be sufficient." Ramanand Swami took pity on Raghunathdas. It was not easy to realise the glory of the lad from Ayodhya.

* * *

Swami stayed at Loj for 15 days. Then he left for Manavadar where he stayed at Mayaram Bhatt's house. Mayaram was a devoted Brahmin disciple of Ramanand Swami. He had witnessed Ramanand Swami's devotion to Sahajanand Swami, but he could not bring himself to fully accept him in place of his guru (Ramanand Swami). It is not that Mayaram was not attracted by Varni's magnetic personality. But for him Ramanand Swami was everything.

The Nawab of Manavadar, Gajefar Khan, came to know that a holy fakir had

come to his town. The Nawab was a devout man. He spent his resources freely on feeding and looking after sadhus and fakirs. He naturally became curious and sent one of his officers to investigate.

When the Nawab's official reached Bhatt's house Ramanand Swami was discoursing to his sadhus and devotees. Varni was sitting beside him. The official saw that Ramanand Swami was occupying a higher seat than anybody else and asked him, "The Nawab Saheb wants to know whether you are God."

Ramanand Swami smiled on hearing this. He told the official in a quiet tone, "I am not God. But I am God's messenger. That young Varni seated over there is God. When the time comes he will show his powers and people will recognise him (as God)." The official looked at Varni and recognised signs of divinity in his unique personality. He returned to the Nawab, "Your Highness! It is indeed true that God has arrived in the village."

* * *

Ramanand Swami celebrated the Fuldol festival of 1801 (A.S. 1857) at Manavadar. He would always raise Sahajanand Swami in front during such occasions so that his spirit of detachment would diminish. But Sahajanand Swami would take part in such celebrations to the extent Ramanand Swami would ask him to. For the rest of the period he would keep himself engrossed in his own form.

Ramanand Swami's next stop was Meghpur. Here he stayed at Rambhai's house and celebrated the festival of Rang Panchmi. Addressing the sadhus and devotees Ramanand Swami declared, "Listen devotees! Listen to my words carefully. Recognise this Sahajanand Swami who is sitting here. He is of a small physique but he is the

supreme God himself."

The guru would speak about Sahajanand Swami's glory, but his disciples, out of carelessness, would not allow it to reach to their heart. However, two women who went into a trance recognised the greatness of Varni. One was Ladkibai Bhat and another was Ladkibai Brahmin. Accompanied by Sahajanand Swami, Ramanand Swami used to go to their houses alternately. When they used to go to Bhat's house, they would either prepare the food themselves or engage a Brahmin to cook. Her daughter, Rukmai, also experienced samadhi. The first time Sahajanand Swami came for a meal, she told her mother, "Mother, I used to tell you about a Varni wandering in the forest. It is the same Varni." Then she (Bhat) listened to the greatness of Varni and was convinced of what Ramanand Swami had been saying all along.

After staying for a few days at Meghpur, Ramanand Swami went to Dhoraji via Bhader and Jamnavad. Hathisinh, the cousin of the sovereign of Gondal, used to reside here. He got an opportunity of having darshan of Narayan Muni. The royal visitor invited Sahajanand Swami to his palace to seek his blessings. There was an awakening in the ruler's inner self. His desires for worldly pleasures diminished. He felt that Varni would redeem him.

Next day, Sahajanand Swami sought Ramanand Swami's permission and went to the river bank for a bath. When he was bathing on the bank, two disciples of the Kabir sect saw him and came running to him, "You are the one who defeated our guru in yesterday's debate. Aren't you?"

"I know nothing," Narayan Muni replied with folded hands.

But the two of them were like the servants of death. They had come to kill Narayan Muni. They rushed at Varni with knives in their hands, but as they came

close they suddenly threw their knives away and fled the scene. Both of them saw the god of death in Narayan Muni's form.

Narayan Muni bathed, changed his clothes and came back. He told Ramanand Swami, "Today death appeared before me. But you protected me, so I am alive."

Ramanand Swami was very angry on hearing the cruel intentions of the Kabir disciples. In the evening Ramanand Swami went to the Kabir mandir. On seeing Ramanand Swami, the head of the Kabir mandir stood up out of respect. Ramanand Swami enquired, "Where have your two disciples gone? They had come to kill our Varni."

The head was already upset as he was defeated by a teenager in a debate. And his disciples, too, saw the god of death in Varni. So he was extremely furious. But Ramanand Swami immediately told him, "The Varni will give you a fitting reply." After saying this, Ramanand Swami left the place.

After leaving Dhoraji, Ramanand Swami visited Faneni, Dudhivadar, Kandorda, Gondal, Bandhia and Jetpur where he celebrated Jalyatra Utsav of Saturday, 12 June 1802 (Jeth *sud* 11). From there Ramanand Swami travelled to Bhader and observed Devshayani Ekadashi of Ashadhi Samvat 1858 (Sunday, 11 July 1802). Thereafter, he came to Mangrol passing through Sankali, Bhader, Piplana, Akha, Agatrai and Kalvani.

He celebrated Janmashtmi and Ganesh Chaturthi at Mangrol. Then he came to Loj and stayed for fifteen days. Thereafter, he went to Panchala with Sahajanand Swami and other sadhus. He camped at a site to the east of the village which contained a stepwell. When Thakor Manubha came to know of this, he went with his sons, Jhinabhai and Gagabhai, for darshan. He saw Varni with

Ramanand Swami. His mind was drawn towards him. He requested, "Swami! Come to the village. This Varni has come for the first time. Allow me an opportunity to serve him."

Considering the intensity of their reverent feelings Ramanand Swami agreed to Thakor's request. Thakor Manubha made splendid arrangements for food. He and his sons then worshipped Swami.

Ramanand Swami said, "Manubha! These two sons of yours will become great devotees."

Then pointing towards Jhinabhai, Varni said, "Of them this boy will become an extraordinary devotee and serve Satsang."

On hearing this from Narayan Muni, Ramanand Swami told Manubha, "Did I not tell you that the supreme Lord will come. That Lord is this Varni."

Swami stayed in Panchala for two days and then left for Manavadar. Here he stayed at Mayaram Bhatt's residence. When Swami was about to leave, Bhatt said, "Swami! Come back soon."

On hearing this Swami said, "It all depends on God's wish."

After leaving Manavadar, Ramanand Swami visited Piplana, Navada, Meghpur and celebrated Dashera at Bhader. Then he came to Dhoraji. From Dhoraji the party went to Jetpur via Kandorda and Movaiya. They arrived in Jetpur on Tuesday, 20 October 1801 (A.S. 1858, Aso *sud* 14) at the special request of Bawa Unnad Khuman. There Ramanand Swami and Narayan Muni stayed in the rooms facing east at Kanbi Bhana Kapadiya's house.

Next day was Sharad Purnima. Ramanand Swami gathered all the sadhus and said, "O sadhus! We should celebrate Sharad Purnima on a grand scale tomorrow night."

Ramdas Swami said, "We don't celebrate this festival. After Jal Jhilani we straight away celebrate the Annakut festival. Devotees will find it difficult to attend two festivals in such a short interval."

Ramanand Swami expressed his desire, "It is true that we have not been celebrating Sharad Purnima all these years. But hereafter we have to observe it. Those who understand its glory will come to attend."

After listening to the guru's order Ramdas Swami did not say anything. But he wanted to know the reason why Swami was insisting on celebrating the festival. Again he asked Ramanand Swami, "Swami! As it is your order we will make preparations for the celebration. But tell us the reason behind it."

Ramanand Swami wondered that he eventhough had given the instruction to celebrate, whether he should reveal its significance or not! After keeping quiet for some time he said, "Ramdas! It is the birthday of Sahajanand Swami's manifest abode – Aksharbrahma."

"Swami, how can you celebrate the birthday of an abode? It is the eternal house of God," he added with laughter.

"In the Srimad Bhagvat, Shesh is the abode of God. Both Baldev and Lakshman were the avatars of Shesh. God always descends on earth with his eternal abode," explained Ramanand Swami.

Ramdas Swami was lost in thought. He was reminded of the questions Varni had asked Muktanand Swami when he first came to Loj. Muktanand Swami gave an exact description of Aksharbrahma. Varni was pleased by listening to it. He told Ramanand Swami, "Swami, now I understand. When Varni had asked, Muktanand Swami explained in detail about Aksharbrahma. But who is this Aksharbrahma? Where has he revealed himself? Where is he now?"

Ramanand Swami was delighted by these questions. He wished to explain these things. Sahajanand Swami was also present in the assembly. There was divine joy spread on his face. Ramanand Swami said, "Do you know Mulji Bhakta of Bhadra?"

"Yes, the son of Bholanath, is he not?" Ramdas Swami enquired to confirm his answer.

"Yes, that is so. He is the avatar of Aksharbrahma." The whole assembly was stunned! Everybody recollected Mulji Sharma in their minds.

Ramanand Swami continued uninterrupted, "My guru, Atmanand Swami, conferred a boon on Bholanath and his wife, Sakarba, that Aksharbrahma, the abode of Purushottam Narayan, will be born to them. After looking at his horoscope I gave him the name of Mulji. Many sadhus in the ashram have seen Mulji. His well-built body, innocent child-like features, lustrous eyes are the characteristics of Mulji, the abode of God."

Ramanand Swami continued, "You may find it difficult to accept today, but that Akshar and this Purushottam – these two eternal entities – have come down to earth to redeem the *jivas*. Along with them they have brought their divine powers and *muktas* like you."

The assembly listened in pin-drop silence. Ramanand Swami continued talking, "We have to celebrate Sharad Purnima as that happens to be his birthday."

The festival was accordingly celebrated on a grand scale. At 12 midnight Varni performed *arti* of Thakorji and distributed *dudhpaua* as *prasad*. That night Ramanand Swami reminded everybody once again, "This is the last festival."

On hearing this Muktanand Swami began to think. He called Parvatbhai and asked, "Did you understand what Ramanand Swami declared?"

Parvatbhai said, "Yes, Swami! This is the second time. It seems that he wishes to conclude his mortal existence soon." Both of them became plunged in serious thought.

Next morning, Ramanand Swami called aside Ramdas Swami, Muktanand Swami and Parvatbhai. When they saw the guru in a solemn mood, they too became serious. He raised the topic slowly, "Do you know why I have called all of you together?"

They shook their heads to say no. Swami continued, "Look, my body has become worn out. There is no guarantee how long it will last. Now, to whom should I entrust my seat?"

Ramdas Swami said, "Swami! That you have to decide yourself. To whomsoever you entrust your seat, we shall abide by his orders."

Ramanand Swami was satisfied with the response. He said, "I shall call other senior devotees in the evening and decide." So saying he asked, "Where is Varni?"

A sadhu replied, "Varni has gone with Unnad Khuman for bathing in the Bhadar Ganga."

As Ramanand Swami always remembered Varni and was very happy whenever he talked about him, Ramdas Swami felt that Ramanand Swami had no place in his heart for anyone except Varni.

Sahajanand Swami was bathing in the Bhadar Ganga. Unnad Bapu was surprised by the unique way in which Varni was swimming in the river. Then Unnad Bapu's eyes became wide with wonder! "Is it Varni or Sheshshayi Bhagwan!" he pondered. Again and again his eyes had the same sight! Shri Krishna had given darshan to Uddhavji as Sheshshayi Bhagwan in the Yamuna stream. Then, when Uddhavji looked at the chariot by the river bank, there, too, he saw Krishna.

Uddhav became convinced that Krishna was a divine being. In the same manner Unnad Bapu was convinced that Varni was no ordinary individual and was endowed with divinity. He accordingly offered his respects to him.

When Unnad Bapu returned with Sahajanand Swami to Ramanand Swami there was a different kind of happiness on Bapu's face. Ramanand Swami could gauge his feelings. Then they attended the spiritual assembly. Ramanand Swami praised Varni's qualities to the skies. He told everybody, "I have been saying I am only a drum-beater, the director of the play will come later. I have sounded the drum and collected you all together. Now this Narayan Muni will help you attain Ekantik Dharma."

When Swami was praising Varni, Raghunathdas who was sitting there was burning with jealousy. He felt, "Muktanand Swami also says Varni is great, Varni is great. Ramdas too beats the drum of Varni's greatness. And Mukund Brahmachari always runs after him. Everybody talks of Varni. Isn't there a competent sadhu in this ashram other than Varni? Today, even the guru has crossed the limits in praising him."

Green with envy Raghunathdas burst out, "Varni, Varni, Varni! Varni came only a few days back. Is there no worthy disciple other than Varni?"

The entire assembly was shocked on hearing the outburst. But Ramanand Swami did not say anything. He knew Raghunathdas. Today, he has come out in his true colours. This is the way of God and his Sadhu. Through such situations, they bring everyone's qualities into the open. Raghunathdas was beside himself with rage. But Ramanand Swami had decided to nip his mischief in the bud itself. He knew that Raghunathdas would create problems in future. He immediately said, "Raghunath, who knows Varni better, you or I? I have kept you with

me for this long and given you importance. And yet you are running down Varni?" So saying he looked at Ramdas Swami and Muktanand Swami and said, "Know this Raghunathdas properly. He will create problems for Satsang in the future."

Meanwhile, Unnad Bapu got up and said with folded hands, "Swami! I have seen the greatness of Varni with my own eyes today! He is God on earth." Then he pointed towards Raghunathdas and said, "Why don't you throw out such an unruly disciple?"

"Bapu! I have kindness in my heart. So I desire to put up with things till the end. However, in the end he will go because of his unruly nature. I don't tell anybody to leave Satsang."

To put an end to the unpleasant topic Ramanand Swami asked, "Is the meal ready?"

Everyone got up to go to Bapu's *darbar* for dinner. After the meal was over Ramanand Swami called the elderly sadhus and devotees, namely, Muktanand Swami, Ramdas Swami, Bhimabhai of Agatrai, Parvatbhai, Mayaram Bhatt, Narsinh Mehta of Piplana, Govardhan Sheth of Mangrol and others.

Addressing the gathering Ramanand Swami said, "In the morning I had the occasion to discuss the topic with Muktanand Swami and Ramdas Swami which I am now raising before you. My body is becoming frail day by day. I do not know how long it will last. So, I want to ask you all about whom should I entrust my seat? I want to hand it over to somebody who has got character and can spread the Satsang."

The assembly was shocked to hear these words from the guru. Was he going to give up his mortal body? Because of this fear nobody uttered a word for a few

moments. Then everybody looked at each other and discussed for a while. Everybody knew that Ramanand Swami eyed the new entrant, Sahajanand, favourably. Varni has limitless powers and glory. Even Unnad Bapu had witnessed his powers that morning. Ramanand Swami was looking at each one of them and waiting for what they had to say. Then Ramdas Swami got up and on behalf of everyone said, "Swami, our unanimous view is that you should appoint Varni in your place. He will manage your spiritual seat."

Ramanand Swami declared, "I also feel the same way. But when you do something with everyone's consent there will be no obstacles. Only Raghunathdas will disagree."

"Don't worry about him. We will take care of him," assured Ramdas Swami.

Ramanand Swami breathed easy on hearing this. He was happy that Sahajanand Swami has earned a place in everyone's heart. He told Muktanand Swami, "Arrange an assembly. Invite all the sadhus and devotees. Call Varni too. I shall announce the happy news today."

On Ramanand Swami's instructions, Muktanand Swami immediately summoned sadhus and devotees to the assembly. Then he himself went to Varni. Sahajanand Swami was busy reading the notes he had prepared on the essence of scriptures. "Varni, Swami has called you to the assembly," he told him.

Sahajanand Swami got up. While getting up he said, "Swami, I know. Ramanand Swami wants to put the load of the universe on my head. But I am not going to accept the responsibility. I had once told you that after Ramanand Swami's darshan both of us will retire to the forest and meditate."

Muktanand Swami smiled on hearing this. He said, "You are capable of creating a forest in the town. You are beyond mind and intellect. And you can bless others to

transcend the influences of mind and intellect."

He took hold of Varni's hand and both of them went to the assembly. Ramanand Swami was sitting on an elevated seat. Another seat was kept ready for Sahajanand Swami by Swami's side. The sadhus and devotees took their places in the assembly. Muktanand Swami was coaxing Varni to occupy his allotted seat. But he hesitated. Ramanand Swami declared, "I have yet to offer you a proper seat. So do not hesitate."

Sahajanand Swami occupied the seat with downcast eyes. Ramanand Swami looked at him and said, "Varni! Today prominent sadhus and devotees have unitedly decided to install you in my place. I have become old now. I have been waiting for you all these days."

Sahajanand Swami was listening with his head bowed low. He had no wish to accept the leadership of the organisation. He spoke to Ramanand Swami with folded hands, "Swami, you are occupying the seat of the guru. But I am not inclined to accept this responsibility. It would give rise to increased chances of contact with wealth and women, which are banned for a renunciant."

There was silence in the assembly. Everybody was eager to know Varni's decision. Ramanand Swami said, "Narayan Muni! You have to think for the good of those who are pious and spiritually inclined. Women and wealth can never pose obstacles for you. But the renunciants, to whom these can create obstacles, will overcome them by associating with you. Householders will also become spiritually enlightened with your association. Don't isolate yourself. Considering the welfare of all these devotees you have to accept the responsibility."

"But Swami this is not a renunciant's dharma. You are my guru and yet you

are asking me to go against dharma..." Swami stopped Varni in mid-sentence, "If you are a true renunciant then by placing you on this seat to dislodge you from dharma would not be proper of me. But you are the manifest God himself. You have come to this earth to establish Bhagvat Dharma. I came here to prepare the ground for you and established the congregation for you. Now it is your turn to take up the reins and establish Ekantik Dharma by preaching right conduct to the people. This is your work. You have to fulfil the role."

Sahajanand Swami felt that Ramanand Swami's feelings had peaked and he was in full flow. Only he could set aside his exalted position as a guru in the assembly before his disciples and show his devotion to Varni as a humble disciple. This was because he had the highest intentions for his disciples at heart and wanted them to be immersed in the stream of devotion to God. He did not want to be worshipped as God. Sahajanand Swami at once got up, touched his feet and said, "Ramanand Swami, I will accept your command."

These words had an electrifying effect on the assembly. There was all-round rejoicing and a spontaneous outburst of 'Ramanand Swamini Jai! Sahajanand Swamini Jai!' Ramanand Swami embraced Varni. He placed his hands on Sahajanand Swami's head. Lavji Joshi was summoned and asked to fix an auspicious day for the transfer of the reins of the spiritual seat from Ramanand Swami to Sahajanand Swami. He announced Monday, 16 November 1801 (A.S. 1858, Kartik *sud* 11) as the auspicious day.

The assembly dispersed. Everybody was singing the same tune, "We are very fortunate that Sahajanand Swami has accepted Ramanand Swami's command. True devotees of God are never left spiritually orphaned."

The Diwali and Annakut festivals were celebrated on a grand scale. Even

then everyone was waiting for Prabodhini Ekadashi in month of Kartik when Ramanand Swami was to hand over his spiritual seat to Sahajanand Swami.

13. Head of Fellowship

1801

On the auspicious day of 16 November 1806 (A.S. 1858, Kartik *sud* 11) Sahajanand Swami was to be handed the reins of the fellowship. Ramanand Swami's joy knew no bounds. He organised a grand function to mark the occasion.

Ramanand Swami had sent invitations to different regions, inviting prominent devotees and heads of various communities to attend the function. He allotted different types of responsibilities to Parvatbhai, Bhimabhai, Govardhanbhai and others. He made them responsible for providing accommodation, decoration, grains, etc. to the guests. Everybody was prepared to participate in the function with the same degree of enthusiasm as Ramanand Swami.

Carts began to come from villages with grains, ghee and gur. Mounds of food materials were piled up in storehouses. The devotees started arriving from villages; some on horses, in camel carts, chariots or on foot. They were singing or chanting bhajans on the way. It occurred to Unnad Khachar, the chief of Jetpur, that the prosperity of an emperor would be nothing compared to what was being organised in his backyard. He felt proud and thought that the pages of history have recorded that the empires of former sovereigns have become extinct with the passage of

time. But he, as the chief of Jetpur which is just a small village, will attain immortality in the annals of religious history. This thought made Unnad Bapu's heart swell with pride. There was an added sparkle in his eyes. Soon the farms and fields of Jetpur were all filled with a concourse of humanity. At night there was a whirl of *ras*.

The music of the flute and *tanpura* added to the festive flair. The atmosphere in Jetpur appeared divine like Akshardham. At that time Ramanand Swami sitting on his seat declared, "Varni, you have to clearly explain the Ekantik Dharma described in the Vasudev Mahatmya, general dharma and Varnashram Dharma. Taking that as the principal text propagate Ekantik Dharma. For spiritual knowledge study in particular the texts written by Shri Ramanujacharya and inspire others to read them. Through this the aspiring souls will come to know the nature of *jiva, maya* and *ishwar* and will never consider God as formless."

Sahajanand Swami listened attentively to the guru's words. When Ramanand Swami finished he asked Sahajanand Swami if he had any doubts or questions.

Sahajanand Swami replied at once, "What doubt can there be? We have partly accepted Ramanujacharya's philosophy according to which the eternal differences between *jiva* and *ishwar* exist. The shastras treat the words of Brahma and Parabrahma as equivalent in meaning. But Brahma has been described in the shastras as Aksharbrahma – that is the abode of God and the *muktas*. This difference between Brahma and Parabrahma is a fact and has to be understood.

"Ramanujacharya has considered all sentient beings to be in the *jiva* category but has not explained the philosophical differences between *jiva, ishwar* and Brahma. And by saying that all those *jivas* apart from Parabrahma are all *atmas* means he has not accepted the distinct identities of *ishwar* and Aksharbrahma.

There is no such clarity in Ramanujacharya's philosophy. That is why if an opponent questions us then without making a distinction between *jiva* and *ishwar,* and Brahma and Parabrahma if we explain things to him, he will not understand the distinctiveness of our philosophy. After making this distinction we should accept Ramanujacharya's Vishisthadvait philosophy."

After listening to Sahajanand Swami's talk Ramanand Swami remained quiet for sometime. He understood the distinctions. Then he said, "Varni, you are the supreme God. You understand these distinctions like the palm of your hands, so it is not fascinating to you. But if people understand these distinctions between *jiva, ishwar,* Brahma and Parabrahma then our philosophy will be different to that of Ramanujacharya's. So we should propagate our philosophy in alliance to that of Ramanujacharya's."

"But then our Sampraday will become a branch of the Ramanuj Philosophy."

"So be it," Ramanand Swami said in assent.

"But we are presenting a new philosophy," Sahajanand Swami argued.

Hearing this Ramanand Swami smiled. He said to Sahajanand Swami, "You are God – Parabrahma. So, who else can explain about you and Aksharbrahma better than yourself? Others have explained according to their intellect and experience."

On hearing this Sahajanand Swami said, "Swami, only when we propagate this eternal knowledge of the nature of Aksharbrahma and Parabrahma will the *jivas* become entitled to ultimate salvation."

Ramanand Swami was enjoying boundless happiness today. And by listening to the talk of the newly initiated Sahajanand Swami the guru's heart rejoiced all the more. He remembered Mulji Sharma of Bhadra, the manifest form of Aksharbrahma or Akshardham.

Meanwhile, he heard the ceaseless sound of carts approaching due to the tinkling sound of bells tied to the bullocks' necks. The carts were coming in one after the other.

At that time Varni stood up and said, "Swami, will you come for a bath to the Bhadarganga? It is nearing 4.00 am."

"Oh, so much time has passed in talking. I did not notice it." Then Ramanand Swami told Sahajanand Swami, "Today you are not to go alone for your bath. You will be led with full honours in a procession." Ramanand Swami desired to highlight the importance of the spiritual investiture.

Ramanand Swami got ready at once. He called Muktanand Swami and other sadhus and devotees. Even the Kathi Darbars were ready, mounted on their horses in full regalia. Drums, trumpets and other musical instruments were brought. Chariots, palanquins, elephants, horses, etc. arrived for the occasion. Ramanand Swami's organisational capacity was such that at his mere signal everything was arranged quickly. He had given the required instructions during the night.

Ramanand Swami led Sahajanand Swami to sit with him on an elephant. Muktanand Swami and the other sadhus sat in chariots and palanquins. The devotees were ready in front singing bhajans. Just before leaving, Ramanand Swami called Mayaram Bhatt and told him, "Make all the necessary arrangements for the ceremonies in the assembly hall, because as soon as Varni bathes and completes his routine rituals he will come straight for the ceremonies."

Mayaram Bhatt seemed to have heard only half of what was said and took off immediately. On seeing this Muktanand Swami remarked, "Bhattji, listen to what he says fully and then go."

Bhattji replied, "Swami, in his joy, our guru has forgotten everything today. He

has repeated these instructions ten times till today. And I have arranged everything in the assembly hall as per his previous orders." On hearing this Muktanand Swami smiled.

Ramanand Swami had sent Brahmins to conduct the rituals on the banks of river Bhadarganga. Sahajanand Swami was to be honoured with 16 steps of ritual worship. Sahajanand Swami felt that in addition to being a guru, Ramanand Swami's attitude towards him was like that of a mother.

When the procession reached the river bank, many devotees had already taken up their position so that they could have a better view of the proceedings. Swami's elephant bent down amidst thunderous 'jais'. Ramanand Swami held Sahajanand Swami's hand. He was walking step by step in the light cast by torches. When the anointing oil and warm water was brought the Brahmins were ready to begin the rituals of worship. Ramanand Swami participated in ritually bathing Sahajanand Swami. The river Bhadarganga was blessed. Varni then wore fresh clothes. The procession returned and Varni went to his quarters. After completing his daily puja, Sahajanand Swami came to the assembly hall accompanied by Ramanand Swami. In the spiritually charged atmosphere the devotees viewed Varni with veneration. The assembly hall was decorated with festoons, bunting and other decorative materials. In the centre they saw a beautiful throne. The platform for the *yagna* was just by the side. The Brahmins had already started the *yagna* ceremonies. Sahajanand Swami and Ramanand Swami sat before the *yagna kund.* The Brahmins performed the preliminary rites. After the rituals were over Ramanand Swami led Sahajanand Swami to the ceremonial seat. When Sahajanand Swami sat on the throne the whole atmosphere reverberated to the shouts of 'Jai Sahajanand Swami'. Thereafter, Ramanand Swami addressed the assembly in order to make

them realise the true form of Sahajanand Swami, "Devotees and sadhus, today is a blessed day for me. He, for whom I had been waiting, and at whose order I had taken up this responsibility, that Purushottam Narayan, Lord of Akshardham, has personally come here. That is why I have decided to give back his work to him. I have told you all repeatedly that 'I am only a drum-beater and the chief player will come later.' He has come to establish Bhagvat Dharma on this earth, and to redeem countless souls and entitle them to Akshardham. In the form of Varni, the Lord of Akshardham is seated resplendently before us. You should recognise his true form and have staunch faith in him. Then only will you all be fully benefited."

After saying this Ramanand Swami looked towards Sahajanand Swami and said, "Today, in the eyes of the world I am your guru. I have established this Uddhav Sampraday. Today, I have handed over the reins of the fellowship to you. So, protect it, preserve it, and inspire dharma, *gnan, vairagya* and bhakti in everyone's hearts. Whoever comes in contact with you, do good to him, regardless of whether he is knowledgeable or ignorant, deserving or undeserving and high or low. Build big mandirs for *upasana,* and inspire the writing of new shastras so that the foundation of the Sampraday becomes solid like a rock. If for some reason the mandirs get old or the country becomes desolated, then that Sampraday which has shastras will remain intact and prosper."

After his oration, Ramanand Swami came to the ceremonial seat and applied the ritual *tilak-chandlo* on the forehead of Sahajanand Swami. Meanwhile, Mayaram Bhatt brought new clothes. Ramanand Swami personally dressed Sahajanand Swami and adorned him with ornaments, garlanded him and performed his *arti.* The whole assembly was spellbound by the sight. Everyone was reverently doing darshan of

Sahajanand Swami.

Sahajanand Swami's Two Boons

Then Ramanand Swami returned to his seat. He addressed Sahajanand Swami, "Swami, I feel greatly pleased because you have accepted this position at my request. There is nothing in this world which I can offer to you who are the cause and master of everything. I feel I should give you something on this occasion. Tell me what should I give you."

On hearing this Sahajanand Swami got up from his seat and came to guru Ramanand Swami. He prostrated to him and stood before him with joined palms and said, "You are my guru and well-wisher. That is why, out of affection for me, you have entrusted me with this guru's post. I desire to seek two boons from you."

The assembly heard this with surprise. Sahajanand Swami's humility and regard for the guru made everybody feel that Ramanand Swami had made the right choice. Now everybody waited with bated breath to know what two boons Sahajanand Swami was going to ask for.

Sahajanand Swami prayed to Ramanand Swami, "Swami, when I see devotees in distress my heart melts. If your devotee is destined to suffer distress inflicted by the sting of one scorpion, may the distress of millions of scorpions stings befall in each and every pore of my body; but no pain should afflict your disciple. Moreover, if the begging bowl is written in the fate of your disciple, may that begging bowl come to me; but on no account should your disciple suffer for want of food or clothing."

Ramanand Swami listened to these words with equipoise. The assembly of

devotees were witnessing the concern shown by Sahajanand Swami for the suffering of his disciples. Real kindness lies in taking on another's sorrows on one's head and suffering on their behalf. Everyone was reminded of this truth on that day. Sahajanand Swami wished to consolidate this sentiment in everyone's heart. Ramanand Swami's eyes welled up with tears of joy. He thought, "He who dedicates his life for the welfare of devotees, is truly God and a guru. Many had experienced the previous avatars in Sahajanand Swami. But on that day they were witnessing God in him. Ramanand Swami said, "So be it." He could not say anything further.

Then Ramanand Swami told the assembly, "This occasion is a very auspicious one. If anyone wants to worship Sahajanand Swami or offer him gifts, please come forward."

After saying this he called Mulji Sharma of Bhadra who was sitting opposite him. Mulji came alongwith his brother, Sundarji, to Sahajanand Swami.

Ramanand Swami introduced him to Sahajanand Swami, who smiled with a sign of recognition and said, "This Mulji is my Akshardham – my eternal abode. In future he will take *diksha* and will be known as Gunatitanand Swami. Even his brother will take *diksha* and he will be known as Shivanand."

Ramanand Swami was aware of this. After his birth it was he who had named him as Mulji Sharma. On that day the glory that Mulji is Akshardham was revealed to the assembly. Mulji Sharma applied *chandlo* to Sahajanand Swami's forehead and gifted him a cow. Then came the turn of Lalji Suthar of Shekhpat. Sahajanand Swami introduced him to the assembly and said, "He is also mine. He is an embodiment of renunciation. After renouncing the world he will write about my divine exploits."

Lalji Suthar worshipped Sahajanand Swami and presented him with an artistic wooden stand for keeping quilts and bedspreads. Then followed Hathibhai, who presented a horse on behalf of the king of Gondal. The Nawab of Manavadar, Gajefarkhan, had sent his minister to honour Sahajanand Swami and to gift him land in his kingdom. The Nawab of Mangrol, Vajrudin, presented a decorated chariot with tinsel-threaded curtains. Mayaram Bhatt and his brother, Govindram, presented shawls to Sahajanand Swami. Indraji Vyas of Mevasa worshipped Sahajanand Swami with flowers and garlanded him. In this manner hundreds of other devotees and well-wishers worshipped Sahajanand Swami with devotion and offered him gifts. Some gave cows or bullocks, some presented chairs or cots, some gifted embroidered silks or garments like *surwal* (trouser) and upper garments. Soon there was a pile of gift articles. Ramanand Swami was happy at the sentiments of the devotees.

Thereafter, Ramanand Swami wished to organise a grand procession, so that everyone could have darshan of the newly appointed head. He had planned out everything beforehand with meticulous care. Those who were entrusted with various tasks had completed the arrangements. Now everything was ready. Ramanand Swami took hold of Sahajanand Swami's hand and led him out to sit on a decorated horse. He himself would lead the procession in a chariot.

The procession began with the beating of drums and the tune of musical instruments. The sadhus, male devotees and women paraded through the town of Jetpur. In the skies, the *devas, gandharvas* and other celestial beings were praying and showering flowers to honour Sahajanand Swami.

After passing through the main streets the procession terminated at the place where Sahajanand Swami was appointed as the new successor of the Sampraday. In

the evening assembly, devotees sang *kirtans* and bhajans all through the night. The next day, after completing the morning ablutions, the final rituals of the *yagna* were carried out. All the Brahmins were then given donations. Then Sahajanand Swami inquired about their lunch arrangements. Maharaj wished to serve the Brahmins and express his affection towards them.

Ramanand Swami and Sahajanand Swami served laddus from one row of Brahmins to the other. The Brahmins had their fill. Ramanand Swami and Sahajanand Swami instructed the volunteers to distribute the *prasad* throughout the whole village, and saw to it that nobody was left out. In fact the kitchen fires of every home remained unlit in the entire village as Ramanand Swami's devotees served *prasad* to everyone, irrespective of caste and creed. Everyone was satisfied. After getting reports that the *prasad* had been served to all, Ramanand Swami, Sahajanand Swami and all the sadhus took their meal.

Ramanand Swami was contented on handing over the reins of the Sampraday to Sahajanand Swami. Thereafter, he was no more interested in staying on earth. His last wish had been fulfilled on that day and in commemoration of that event a grand procession had been organised to express the joy of one and all.

14. Bhagwan Swaminarayan's Mission

1801

After Ramanand Swami handed over the reins of the spiritual empire to Sahajanand Swami he felt that his mission was over. At the investiture in Jetpur he spoke about the glory of Sahajanand Swami. Ramanand Swami was convinced of the divinity and glory of Sahajanand Swami, but the same could not be said of his own senior disciples. What appeared certain to the guru was doubted by the disciples. But Ramanand Swami felt that all doubts about Sahajanand Swami would be resolved through the passage of time.

With his work done, Ramanand Swami wanted to quit the scene. Those who had come for the investiture at Jetpur began to return to their homes. Those who were convinced of the divinity of Sahajanand Swami were, however, reluctant to leave. Also, as long as Ramanand Swami was in Jetpur, people would not leave the place. So, he decided to go to Faneni for his last journey. Unnad Bapu, at whose place the investiture had been held, was eager that both Ramanand Swami and Sahajanand Swami stay in his town forever.

Meanwhile, a servant told Bapu that a Muslim was loitering around in a suspicious way. The stranger was led to the presence of Unnad Bapu, who asked him to

explain what he was doing on the outskirts of the village. It transpired that he had felt great peace of mind when he sat on the outskirts of Jetpur. The stranger was brought to the presence of Sahajanand Swami and he was greatly attracted by his divinity. "You are Allah, have mercy upon me," he said touching his feet. So, interesting things began to happen at Jetpur. But some of Ramanand Swami's disciples, who took him to be God, forgot the words of glory in which he had described Sahajanand Swami's divinity.

Ramanand Swami's decision to depart the scene was unalterable. He sent for the chariot gifted by the Nawab of Mangrol. He told Sahajanand Swami to accompany him in the chariot. Muktanand Swami and the other sadhus sat in the other vehicles to go to Faneni. Unnad Bapu, his officials and the devotees of Jetpur came to bid them farewell till the outskirts of the village. Little did they realise that it was to be their last darshan of Ramanand Swami.

Last Days in Faneni

On arriving in Faneni, the leading devotees, namely, Velabhai, Gokarbhai, Kanbhai and others extended a hearty welcome to the party. Ramanand Swami, Sahajanand Swami and the other senior sadhus stayed at Soni Ramji's house. After having lunch the devotees did not wish to leave the presence of Sahajanand Swami. So, Ramanand Swami said, "An assembly will be held in the evening. You may all come back then."

When the devotees assembled in the evening, Ramanand Swami said, "Nilkanth's investiture went off very well. With his arrival all our sorrows have dissipated. My work too has been completed. Previously, Shri Krishna, Uddhav, Akrur, Yudhishthir, Arjun and others had a human form, and subsequently they

departed. Nobody stays on earth forever. Ours is a world where death is certain. I too have to shed my body. I am leaving this Varni to protect you all. So don't grieve." These words of Ramanand Swami struck everyone like a lightening bolt. Ramanand Swami had once again announced his resolve to leave this mortal world.

The next day, Ramanand Swami caught a fever. Despite the medicines given to him, the fever did not subside. In the next few days, he lost his appetite. That weakened him further. Everyone prayed for his recovery, but his condition deteriorated day by day.

Ramanand Swami Departs

On Thursday, 17 December 1801 (A.S. 1858, Magshar *sud* 13), Ramanand Swami got up in the morning at his usual time and completed his ablutions. The previous day, two of his close disciples, Parvatbhai and Mayaram Bhatt, had arrived. They realised that their guru would not stay any longer on earth. When they saw his emaciated body, tears welled up in their eyes. It was to be his last day on earth. Prior to the time of his earthly departure, Ramanand Swami got down from his seat and sat on the *darbha* spread on the floor. He gave a farewell address to his disciples. "Varni is God. Believe this firmly in your minds and follow his instructions. I was only a drum-beater who has gathered all of you together and brought you to Varni. Now, he will establish and propagate Bhagvat Dharma. He will forever open the doorway of final liberation to all." At that point he suddenly stopped breathing, and his soul left the body. The room was filled with divine light. Then on realising what had happened, everyone deeply mourned for Ramanand Swami's demise.

Sahajanand Swami, Muktanand Swami and the other disciples ritually bathed the

body of Ramanand Swami, applied sandalwood paste and the *tilak-chandlo* on his forehead. Ramdas Swami, Muktanand Swami, Sahajanand Swami and Mayaram Bhatt carried the palanquin to the banks of the Bhadraa river. The water of the holy river was sprinkled on the body and then it was cremated. After the fire had died down all of them returned to the mandir chanting bhajans and bathed.

Addressing the mourners Sahajanand Swami said, "Great souls never leave our earth. So, all should follow Ramanand Swami's commands and reflect upon his virtues. On doing this you will not feel that he has left you, and subsequently, you will realise the manifest form of God." The words of Sahajanand Swami soothed everyone's heart. They remembered Ramanand Swami's words. He had appointed Sahajanand Swami as his successor because of his noble and divine attributes.

On the twelfth and thirteenth day after Ramanand Swami's demise, Varni performed the last ritual of the post death ceremonies. One of his first acts after the guru's departure was to instruct Muktanand Swami to go to Kutch with his sadhus to preach and bring solace to the devotees there.

Introducing the Swaminarayan Mantra

On Thursday, 31 December 1801 (A.S. 1858, Magshar *vad* 11), an assembly of sadhus and devotees was held on the banks of the river Bhadraa. Sahajanand Swami explained the duties of sadhus, men and women. Then he instructed the devotees to worship the manifest form of God by chanting the 'Swaminarayan' mantra. When a question was asked about the mantra, Sahajanand Swami clarified, "The word 'Swaminarayan' stands for God and his eternal abode. God in this case means 'Narayan' and his eternal abode or Aksharbrahma is denoted by the word 'Swami'."

In the Swaminarayan Sampraday 'Swami' is Gunatitanand Swami and 'Narayan'

is Sahajanand Swami. To realise God it is necessary to identify one's *atma* with Aksharbrahma. Only the Satpurush can help one realise God. That Satpurush is the guru in whom God manifests.

Divine Experience of Shitaldas

A sannyasi called Shitaldas was seated in the assembly. Though he did not understand Sahajanand Swami's discourse he experienced peace of mind. He got up during the assembly to touch his feet.

"Mahatma, where do you come from?" Sahajanand Swami asked.

"I come from central India and am in search of God," he replied.

"Then have you found God?"

"I came here to the west and heard that Ramanand Swami is God. But he has passed away," the sannyasi replied sadly.

Sahajanand Swami then blessed him and asked, "If you can have darshan of Ramanand Swami, will you stay here?" Shitaldas wondered how he could have Ramanand Swami's darshan. As he was pondering, Sahajanand Swami told him, "Chant the Swaminarayan mantra and Ramanand Swami will definitely give you darshan."

Shitaldas deeply desired for Ramanand Swami's darshan. So he sat cross-legged and started chanting the Swaminarayan mantra. He meditated on Sahajanand Swami and after a little while he lost consciousness and fell flat on the ground. Sahajanand Swami assured the assembly that there was nothing wrong with the sannyasi and that he was experiencing samadhi.

Everyone in the assembly observed the gestures of Shitaldas. They saw him join his palms in prayer. His face was calm and relaxed. Shitaldas saw Sahajanand Swami

seated on a throne in Akshardham. Ramanand Swami and the twenty-four divine incarnations were standing praying before him. He was surprised at what he saw. He had heard that Ramanand Swami was God, but he saw that he was praying to Sahajanand Swami.

Shitaldas first offered puja to Sahajanand Swami. Then he wished to offer puja to all the *muktas*. But he saw that they were countless. He thought, "How would it be possible to offer puja to all of them?" The all-knowing Sahajanand Swami then advised him, "Why don't you wish that if Ramanand Swami is God then through his grace may you attain innumerable forms."

Shitaldas wished accordingly, but nothing happened.

Sahajanand Swami smiled knowingly and then advised again, "Now make a wish that out of the twenty-four incarnations if anyone is the supreme God then may you attain countless forms."

Shitaldas did likewise, but again nothing happened.

Finally, Sahajanand Swami said, "Now make a wish that if Sahajanand Swami is the supreme God then may you attain innumerable forms."

No sooner had Shitaldas wished, by the grace of Sahajanand Swami, he saw countless forms of himself issuing out from his body. He attained the same number of forms to that of the *muktas*. He performed puja of all the *muktas* at the same time. Then on looking at Sahajanand Swami he saw infinite avatars and celestial beings emanating from him and then merging into his divine form.

After a while Shitaldas regained consciousness. There was immense joy on his face. He narrated what he had seen to the assembly and then added, "This Sahajanand Swami is the supreme God. Ramanand Swami is his disciple."

Shitaldas took *paramhansa diksha* from Bhagwan Swaminarayan and was named

Vyapkanand Swami.

Conclusion

After introducing the Swaminarayan mantra in Faneni village, Bhagwan Swaminarayan launched his ministry in Gujarat for the establishment of Ekantik Dharma. He initiated 3,000 sadhus and *paramhansas* of the highest calibre. He laid a strict moral code of *nishkam* (celibacy), *nirlobh* (non-greed), *nisswad* (non-taste), *nissneh* (detachment) and *nirman* (humility) for the sadhus and instructed them to uplift society socially, morally and spiritually. In times of famine and catastrophe he opened almshouses and dug wells to provide succour to the afflicted. Bhagwan Swaminarayan and his sadhus uplifted the downtrodden classes, unshackling them from vices and addictions. He campaigned and abolished the heinous customs of sati and female infanticide prevalent in Gujarat, and also eradicated violent *yagnas* in which animals were sacrificed. He educated the masses to take refuge in God and give up false practices and superstitions. He reformed lawless men like Joban Pagi, Takho Pagi, Verabhai and others into God-loving devotees. They abided by the moral code of conduct, abstaining from liquor, meat, stealing, adultery and other vices. He inspired the women devotees to conduct discourses among themselves and thus promoted literacy.

Bhagwan Swaminarayan preached the loftiest wisdom of the Hindu shastras in the most down-to-earth manner. His discourses have been compiled into the Vachanamrut. He wrote a moral code of conduct called the Shikshapatri for the good of mankind. For the promotion of *upasana* and bhakti he built six mandirs in Gujarat. Bhagwan Swaminarayan passed away at the age of 49 on 1 June 1830.

Prior to his departure, for the perpetuation of the Sampraday and its aims and

ideals, Bhagwan Swaminarayan declared his ideal and choicest disciple Aksharbrahma Gunatitanand Swami (1785-1867) as his successor.

As time passed, Gunatitanand Swami was revered as the abode and the gateway to moksha. After the demise of Gunatitanand Swami the spiritual lineage was continued through Bhagatji Maharaj and then Shastriji Maharaj.

In 1907, in accordance with the Vedic preachings of Bhagwan Swaminarayan, Shastriji Maharaj established the Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS). He built five mandirs and consecrated the *murtis* of Akshar Purushottam Maharaj in the central shrine.

In 1951, Shastriji Maharaj was succeeded by Yogiji Maharaj, who established the children and youth forums and the weekly *satsang* assemblies. He initiated 51 educated youths into the sadhu order and spread the BAPS Satsang to East Africa and England.

In 1971, when Yogiji Maharaj passed away, he was succeeded by Pramukh Swami Maharaj, the fifth successor in the illustrious spiritual tradition of Bhagwan Swaminarayan. He has guided the BAPS into a worldwide socio-spiritual organisation, personally consecrating more than 650 mandirs, initiating more than 700 youths as sadhus and inspiring a volunteer force of 55,000 youths. His divine humanism has provided succour to countless souls in times of natural catastrophe and personal need.

Pramukh Swami Maharaj has inspired national and international cultural complexes like the Swaminarayan Akshardham monuments at New Delhi and in Gandhinagar, Gujarat, and *shikharbaddh* mandirs in London, Nairobi, Houston and Chicago that epitomise the glory of Indian culture for the uplift of mankind.

Pramukh Swami Maharaj's striking humility, simplicity and spiritualism have

impressed many religious and national leaders. And above all, his profound experience and realisation of God is the essence of his divine lustre and success. Thus the spirit and work of Bhagwan Swaminarayan is continued through his hierarchy of Gunatit Sadhus.

Appendix-1

The Icy Paths to Kailas-Mansarovar

It was November 1792.

The hilly terrain of Badrinath, where, since ancient times, pilgrims had bowed with awe and devotion, was covered with a pure white blanket of snow.

Yogis and sannyasis were meditating in the caves and recesses of the Himalayan mountains.

The soul of the *murti* of Bhagwan Shri Badrivishal was invoked into the portable *murti* of Uddhavji, and had been taken 5000 ft. below to the village of Pandukeshvar on the banks of the river Alaknanda, where it would reside for the six months of winter.

For six months, the trekking paths between Joshimath, through the snow-clad Himalayan peaks, to Badrinath would be silent, without any human visitors.

Even the streams, previously gushing from the icy peaks, had begun to freeze, forming long snake-like columns. The trekking paths had turned into deathly glacier trails. And the rumbling sound of the flowing Alaknanda had frozen and become mute.

This beautiful pilgrim trek, which has attracted the devout for centuries, had

been transformed into an icy death trap.

Adding to the treacherous conditions, dark clouds hovered above, raining their bullet-like ammunition of hailstones.

The temperature dropped menacingly because of the swirling, biting cold wind, which became colder as it made contact with the icy terrain.

But suddenly, from between the tall, lifeless icy peaks of this Uttarakhand region, a lone trekker appeared. Amid the flashes of lightning and roars of thunder, giant rock boulders slid down the mountain face, thumping to a halt by the trekker's feet. In response, he merely uttered "Hare... Hare..." in his sweet, child's voice, which echoed throughout the Himalayan valleys.

For a moment, even time stood still. Where, even in their dreams, the most courageous and experienced men fear to tread, what was this 11-year-old child yogi doing? Where, in this hostile weather and on treacherous paths, was he heading for? Barefooted, bare-chested and without even a warm cap on his head. Was this child travelling on this path of death to make history or what?

Who was this child yogi?

His name was Nilkanth. His lotus-like eyes gleamed with the radiance of a firm conviction. Walking barefoot on the icy terrain had grazed and numbed his soft, delicate feet. Despite the oozing blood from his feet, Nilkanth's determination was stronger than even the Himalayas.

He had no equipment, no companions, not even any source of warmth. He had no tree shades, no comfortable cushions. He had no food, not even any fruit – living totally just on air!

For six months, where not even a single human voice could be heard, he trekked amid the icy, mountainous slopes.

Why had this child set out? And what was his goal? He was heading towards Kailas-Mansarovar.

His pilgrimage had begun in Ayodhya. He was born in Chhapaiya, a small exotic village near Ayodhya. For ten years, he had given his mother, Bhaktimata, and father, Dharmadev, the bliss of his divine company. With their passing away to the divine abode, he had embarked on this tough pilgrimage with a definite purpose.

In the annals of world history, this unique pilgrimage has stood out as the only one undertaken by an 11-year-old child.

Many events throughout history have stirred man's emotions, left man amazed for centuries, and remained beyond the realm of human understanding.

Nilkanth's pilgrimage to Mansarovar and Gangotri is one such historic event.

Among all the yogis, sannyasis and others who set out to venture in the Himalayas, Nilkanth's story is unique. His selfless journey of unflinching determination undertaken for the spiritual uplift and salvation of mankind, will provide perennial inspiration.

Nilkanth embarked upon his journey in January-February 1793, during the peak of the Himalayan winter.

Those who have undertaken a pilgrimage to the Himalayas, even once, will truly appreciate the challenges faced by Nilkanth. And all will certainly bow their heads in reverence and hail his name, Jai Nilkanth!

APPENDIX-2

NILKANTH VARNI'S PILGRIMAGE TO KAILAS-MANSAROVAR

For millennia Hindus have revered the sanctity of Mt. Kailas and Mansarovar as heaven on earth. They are a part of the Himalayas and are situated in northwest Tibet (or Gangdesh).

The most beautiful and captivating of all the lakes in the world is Mansarovar. Formerly, in ancient India, it was known as Brahmasar. It is a fresh water lake perched at 15,000 ft. above sea level. Since Vedic times, thousands of years ago, it has been revered as a holy pilgrim place and is believed to be the source of four subterranean rivers, namely, Shatadru (Sutlej), Sindhu, Brahmaputra and Saryu (Karnali).

The Hindu scriptures called the Purans describe the death of Bhasmasur, a demon, at this place. Many nearby landmarks are also related to both famous and notorious people of Indian culture. Ravan, the King of Lanka, performed austerities at Ravanhrud or Rakshas Tal. The noble King Mandhata renounced his regal comforts to perform severe austerities at Mt. Mandhata.

The glory of Kailas[1] and Mansarovar, where nature unleashes its fury and dons its beauty, are sung at length by the shastras of Sanatan Dharma. The

Bhagvad Gita describes Mt. Kailas as a divine form of God, "*Meruhu shikhar-inãmaham,*" meaning, "I am Kailas (Meru) among all mountains."[2]

Once Rishi Dattatrey travelled from Vindhyachal Mountains in the south to the Himalayas and then arrived at Mansarovar. After a holy dip in its waters and seeing the royal swans *(rajhansas)* he asked Shiv and Parvati, who were residing in a cave in Mt. Kailas, "Which is the holiest of holy places in the world?" Shivji replied, "The holiest of holy places is the Himalaya in which lies Kailas and Mansarovar."

The Valmiki Ramayan, in the Kishkindha Kand and Bal Kand,[3] and the Bhishma Parva, Van Parva, Dron Parva and Anushashan Parva of the epic Mahabharat describe, through stories, the glory and beauty of Kailas-Mansarovar. According to the Uttar Puran, the first Tirthankar of the Jain Dharma, Rishabhdev, performed austerities and gave up his mortal existence at Mt. Kailas. The grandmaster of all Indian poets, Kalidas, pours his heart in penning the grandeur of Kailas and Mansarovar in his Sanskrit work called *Meghdut*.[4]

European explorers, trekkers and nature lovers have also been fascinated by their visits. In 1906 the renowned Swedish explorer Dr. Sven Hedin writes, "There is no finer ring on earth than which bears the names of Mansarovar, Kailas and Gurla Mandhata; it is a turquoise set between two diamonds. The grand impressive silence which reigns around the inaccessible mountains, and the inexhaustible wealth of crystal-clear water which makes the lake the mother of the holy rivers... Whoever is of a pure and enlightened mind and bathes in the waves of Mansarovar attains thereby to a knowledge of the truth concealed from other mortals."[5]

Dr. Sven Hedin describes his first sight of Mansarovar, "Even the first view from the hills on the shore caused us to burst into tears of joy at the wonderful, magnificent landscape and its surpassing beauty. The oval lake, somewhat narrower in the south than the north, and with a diameter of about 15.5 miles, lies like an enormous turquoise embedded between two of the finest and most famous mountain giants of the world, the Kailas in the north and Gurla Mandhata in the south, and between huge ranges, above which the two mountains uplift their crowns of bright white eternal snow. Yes, already I felt the strong fascination which held me fettered to the banks of Mansarovar, and I knew I would not willingly leave the lake before I had listened, until I was weary, to the song of its waves."[6]

Research scholars of the 'Survey of India' and intrepid explorers, S.G. Burrard and H.H. Hayden write about Mansarovar in their book, "Mansarovar was the first lake known to geography. Lake Mansarovar is famous in Hindu mythology; it had, in fact, become famous many centuries before the lake of Geneva had aroused any feeling of admiration in civilised man. Before the dawn of history Mansarovar had become the sacred lake and such it has remained for four millennium."[7]

In the history of humanity Mansarovar is an ancient lake. Geographically it has been lauded as the world's first lake.

Since many eras the land of Mansarovar and Kailas has been a ground for spiritual endeavours. Thousands of yogis, sadhus, sannyasis and spiritual seekers have retreated to this icy, desolate region for austerities and meditation to realise God. Even today a visitor can experience the vibrations of divinity of their austerities and spiritual sadhanas.

Swami Pranavanandaji, who had pilgrimaged to and stayed at Mansarovar thirty-two times writes, "From the spiritual point of view, she has a most enrapturing vibration of the supreme order that can soothe and lull even the most wandering mind into sublime serenity and can transport it into involuntary ecstasies."[8]

Edwin T. Atkinson, a renowned researcher who wrote the Himalayan Gazetteer, writes about Badrinath, Kedarnath, Gangotri, Yamunotri and the land of Mansarovar in 1882. In his book *Religion in the Himalayas* Atkinson writes about Mansarovar, "Nature in her wildest and most rugged forms bears witness to the correctness of the belief that there is the home of 'the great god'... All the aids to worship in the shape of striking scenery, temples, mystic and gorgeous ceremonial and skilled celebrants are present, and he must indeed be dull who returns from his pilgrimage unsatisfied."[9]

Through the corridors of time, among the thousands of ascetics, aspirants and explorers that trekked the most challenging land of Kailas and Mansarovar was a peerless pilgrim called Nilkanth Varni.

More than two centuries ago, between 1792 and 1793, an eleven-year-old child yogi called Nilkanth (later known as Bhagwan Swaminarayan) pilgrimaged to Mansarovar alone. Details of his fascinating journey, in which he faced untold challenges and furies of nature may seem difficult for ordinary people to believe. But to arrive at some description of Nilkanth's trials and tribulations we can draw parallels from the written accounts and studies of pilgrims and explorers who have bravely trudged and trod on the trails and lands that Nilkanth had walked. This research will give an inkling into Nilkanth's divine persona.

The first notable account on Mansarovar was in 1715 by a European trav-

eller called Father Desideri.[10] In 1792, when Nilkanth had embarked upon his pilgrimage to Mansarovar, a sadhu by the name of Purana Poori[11] of Kashi described his experiences of his pilgrimage to Mansarovar to an English official called Jonathan Duncan. The latter's write up, 'An Account of Two Fakeers', was published in *Asiatic Researches*.[12] The experiences of Purana Poori are fascinating. But the season in which Purana Poori and Father Desideri journeyed to Mansarovar from Kathmandu was less challenging and harsh than that of Nilkanth's.

About that time, in August 1792, a sannyasi named Purna Swantantra Brahmachari Prakashanand also narrated his experiences of his pilgrimage to Mansarovar.[13] In 1796 a sadhu named Swami Harivallabh had accomplished a pilgrimage to Mansarovar and later he had been the guide of the English adventurers Dr. William Moorcroft (a veterinary surgeon) and Captain Hearsay on their journey to Mansarovar via the Niti Pass in 1812.[14]

In 1773 a renowned pundit, Purangir, employed as a translator by Lord Warren Hastings, the Governor of Calcutta, pilgrimaged to Kailas-Mansarovar. In 1808 Captain Wilford wrote a report of Purangir's visit to Kailas-Mansarovar in 'Essay on the Sacred Isles in the West'.[15] Thereafter, at the beginning of the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries many intrepid Indian and European explorers and pilgrims visited Mansarovar and published their accounts.

We will try to understand Nilkanth's epic journey through documented descriptions and factsheets of many explorers and pilgrims.

It would be pertinent to point out that Nilkanth's journey cannot be compared with the treks and efforts of other explorers and pilgrims who were partially or fully geared up for the harsh climate and terrain. The accounts of such jour-

neys in the last 200 years are available in the archives in India. The accounts vividly portray how pilgrims and adventurers fared through the frigid temperatures, with clothes, food, guides, maps, medicines, tents, beasts of burden and porters.

In the case of Nilkanth, what did he possess? He had a *mala, kamandal,* a loincloth, a cloth wrapped around his waist, no footwear and no arrangements and materials for cooking food and setting up shelter. Nilkanth travelled alone with no maps or guides. In the chronicles of history where thousands had travelled in one of nature's harshest and pitiless terrains, Nilkanth's journey was unique and matchless. The reason simply being that he journeyed at the age of eleven, without any means or materials and wearing only a loincloth. Also, in comparison, the other pilgrims took the easier paths and in the favourable seasons. Dr. Sven Hedin and nearly all other European trekkers took the path conducive to ponies, yaks or Tibetan sheep which carried their supplies.

So, Nilkanth's journey to Kailas-Mansarovar was historic and unparalleled.

Even today the journey for any pilgrim, with all the necessary facilities, rations and in the appropriate season, is difficult and challenging. It is amazing how Nilkanth, a child yogi, must have accomplished his journey in the most formidable and forbidding terrains of the Himalayas in winter.

Nilkanth's Journey to Mansarovar

Reports and publications prescribe the months between July and September as ideal for a pilgrimage to Kailas-Mansarovar. Nilkanth embarked on his journey to Mansarovar from Joshimath on 17 October 1792.[16] Prior to this, from Kedarnath (11,758 ft.), he had reached Badrinath (10,272 ft.) on 24 September 1792. He

stayed here for 20 days and on Kartak *sud* 1 (15 October) Nilkanth wished to travel to Mansarovar directly from Badrinath. But the priest of Badrinath Mandir, Raval, insisted that he come down with him to Joshimath, which he did.[17] The residents of Badrinath retreat on Kartak *sud* 1 for six months to Joshimath, 5,000 ft. below, to avoid the deathly cold winter and heavy snow falls. The Badrinath Mandir is closed for six months. Nilkanth acceded to the wishes of the priest, stayed for a few days in Joshimath and departed for Mansarovar, up further north in the frigid winter season.

There are twelve roads[18] from India to Mansarovar (now in Tibet, China). There is no reference as to which trail Nilkanth took in the scriptures of the Swaminarayan Sampraday. The Sampraday's scripture, *Shri Haricharitramrut Sagar,* mentions that Nilkanth, after leaving from Joshimath towards Mansarovar, went to the ashram of Nar-Narayan Rishi in Badrivan. And from here he proceeded to Mansarovar.[19]

Badrivan

With reference to stories from the Purans, Badrivan is a land where Nar-Narayan Rishi performs austerities. Since it is a divine region, beyond human perception, it is impossible for a mortal to visit it. Despite this, according to descriptions in the Purans, Badrivan has been geographically identified and marked by researchers. Badrivan is a region in the Himalayas. The references given are interesting and worthy of note.

According to the publication, *The Himalayan Heritage,* Badrivan or Badrikashram[20] is the region from Kanva Ashram (that is above Nandprayag) to Mt. Satopanth (which lies 27 km northwest of Badrinath).

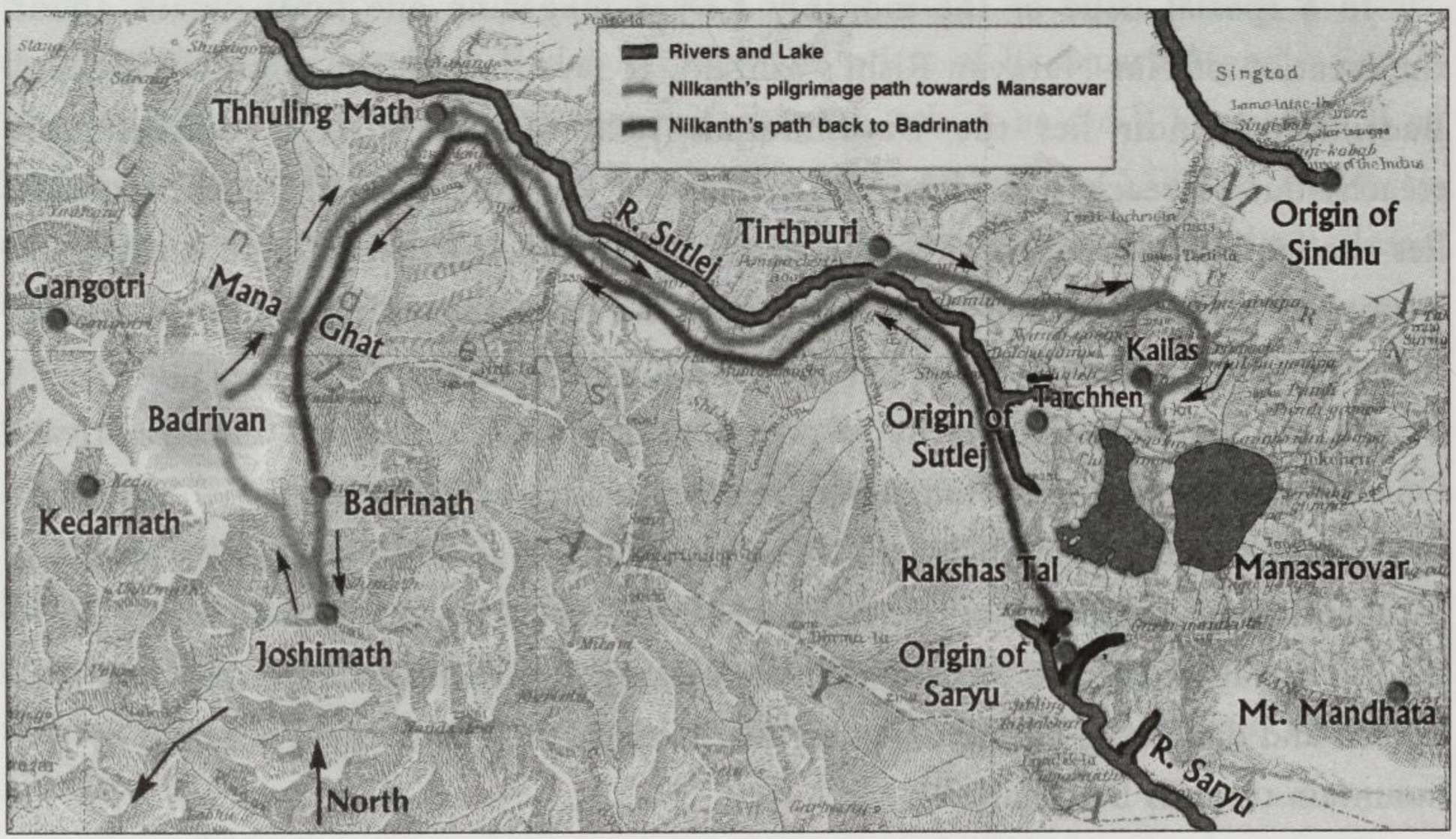
In a special issue of the monthly *Kalyan* magazine one finds details about the location of Nar-Narayan Rishi's ashram. It says that on the mountain behind Badrinath Mandir lies the Urvashikund (tank of water). It is difficult and treacherous to reach this place. Further ahead lies Kurma Tirth, and beyond it lies the land of Nar-Narayan's ashram. The magazine further adds that this path is unreachable for ordinary mortals.[21] *Shri Haricharitramrut Sagar* also describes that no ordinary mortal can reach the ashram of Nar-Narayan.[22]

At this juncture it is worthy to take note of another point regarding Badrivan. On studying the mountain range between Badrinath and Kedarnath, Mt. Satopanth lies northwest of Badrinath Mandir. The mountains Nar and Narayan lie near Mt. Satopanth. And behind these two mountains, to its west lies Mt. Kedarnath, rising to 22,700 ft. To reach the ashram of Nar-Narayan (or Badrikashram), the less well known and dangerous path passes near Mt. Kedarnath. The river Arva passes by this mountain towards Badrinath.[23]

Bearing this geographical account in mind let us see Nilkanth's pilgrimage as described in *Shri Haricharitramrut Sagar.*[24] When Nilkanth Varni arrived at Badrivan or Badrikashram, Nar-Narayan Rishi spoke to him, "No human can reach this place. Only if Kedarnath (the human form of Mt. Kedar) brings someone can a person reach here."[25]

From this we can infer that there is some geographical relation or connection between Mt. Kedarnath and Nar-Narayan Rishi's ashram.

In another reference the region called 'Bharat-khand' lies 10 miles west of Mt. Satopanth in the Himalayas.[26] With relation to scriptures of the Swaminarayan Sampraday and the Purans, Nar-Narayan Rishi is known as the king of 'Bharatkhand'.[27] Swami Siddhanandmuni (also known as Adharanand Swami), a



The map shows Nilkanth Varni's journey from Badrinath to Kailas-Mansarovar via Joshimath, Badrivan, Mana Ghat, Thhuling Math and Tirthpuri. After performing the parikrama of Mt. Kailas, Nilkanth went to Mansarovar....

paramhansa of Bhagwan Swaminarayan, describes the ashram of Nar-Narayan Rishi in the chapter on Nilkanth's arrival, "There is no other ashram like this in the region of 'Bharatkhand'[28]."[29]

From all the geographical references it is clear that Nilkanth's visit to Nar-Narayan Rishi's ashram in Badrivan is the region that lies between the mountains of Nar-Narayan, which is near Mt. Satopanth that lies 23 km northwest of Badrinath. So it is in this divine, spiritual plane, unseen to mortals, that Nar-Narayan Rishi is engaged in austerities.

On leaving Joshimath, Nilkanth reached Nar-Narayan Rishi's ashram at Badrivan on 7 November 1792 (Kartak *vad* 8).[30] The *Shri Haricharitramrut Sagar,* states that Nilkanth performed austerities for three months[31] in the ashram of Nar-Narayan Rishi. Then in the first week of February Nilkanth departed towards Mansarovar. Now the question is which path did Nilkanth take?

Badrivan to Mansarovar

From Badrivan (near Mt. Satopanth), Nilkanth had only one path to take on his journey to Mansarovar. This path passes through Mana Ghat (Pass). Amongst all the paths to Mansarovar from India, the one through Mana Ghat (Pass) is the least used. The reason being that it is the most dangerous and difficult of them all.[32] Nilkanth took this challenging mountainous path, trekking 383 km, via Mana Ghat to go to Kailas and Mansarovar.

North of Badrinath, the village of Mana (also Manibhadrapuri) is the native of the Bhotiya tribe and is the last human settlement[33] on the path to Mansarovar. To the north of Mana village lies the Mana Ghat at an elevation of 18,400 ft.

James Baillie Fraser, a British writer and explorer, who visited Mansarovar in the time of Bhagwan Swaminarayan describes in his book, *The Himala Mountains,* published in Britain in 1820, about the snowy and desolate passes and regions to Mansarovar. He writes about the passes, "These are all so dangerous and toilsome that few but the wildest inhabitants of the most inhospitable regions choose to invade their deserts of eternal rock and snow, where no living thing is seen, and no means are to be obtained for preserving life."[34]

The region of Mana Ghat and its neighbouring lands are extremely turbulent and frigid. Sometimes there are violent torrential showers and sometimes severe snowfalls. One can only travel through here during the months of May to September. A British officer Mr. Trail writes, "An interval of four months without a fall of snow is rare. Snow begins to fall about the end of September and continues to accumulate to the beginning of April. It is intensely cold during this period... In open and level situations, unaffected by drifts or avalanches, the bed of snow reaches at its maximum depth from 6 to 12 feet..."[35]

When Nilkanth was travelling through Mana Ghat it was February. To understand the climatic conditions, a well known Indian writer, Rai Pati Ram Bahadur, in his book *Garhwal, Ancient and Modern,* published in 1900, states that between December and April the region is desolate, overwhelmed with snow and humanless.[36]

The Mana Ghat is covered with snow all the year round. In July 1929 Swami Tapovanji and Swami Krishnashramji travelled to Mansarovar through the region of Mana Ghat. From their descriptions one can infer the rigours and hardships of Nilkanth's journey. Let us once again remind ourselves that Nilkanth was only 11 years old, travelling alone, wearing only a loincloth and with no food or material provisions whatsoever. He crossed the Mana Ghat in the bitter, winter month of February.

Swami Tapovanji, in his book, *Wanderings in Himalayas* writes his experiences, "On the sixth night we pitched our tents five to six miles below Mana Ghat. Thereafter we made a steep ascent. There were huge rocks and glaciers. There was not an inch of land we could see. At 18,400 ft. the deficiency of oxygen in the air

made our heads ache and split terribly. This was not the case for us pilgrims alone, but the Bhotiya people who travelled this region frequently also experienced the same. The three to four wild horses, belonging to some businessmen accompanying with us, were carried away by a small river. One of them died due to exhaustion and weakness. The businessmen said that this happens every year. Death comes seeking no permission and neither does it allow anyone to say their goodbyes.

"The head or tip of Mana Ghat is a sea of ice and snow. Here there is a frozen lake called Devsar, with a circumference of 10-12 furlongs. We started walking from early morning. Two miles later we arrived at a holy place on Mana Ghat. Then we walked a further five miles and descended the Ghat. Our great sages took this trail on their pilgrimage to Kailas. We saw a tiger, locally called saku. It preys upon wild horses."[37]

A contemporary issue of a British gazetteer describes that in the winter season (in which Nilkanth travelled) the land is covered with abundant glaciers.[38] To cross such a terrain was a challenge.

In 1946 a sannyasi scholar of Uttar Kashi, Swami Prabodhanandji,[39] and five more sannyasis, with a guide, crossed a glacier between Gaumukh (the origin of river Ganga) and Badrinath. Swami Prabodhanandji describes their pains and difficulties (translated from Swami Anand's Gujarati version), "Our feet, by walking in mud and slush and jumping on rocky ground, became so numb that we all felt like lying down to sleep.

"The winter snow was frozen as it was. Our bare soles were numb, sore and inflicted by deathly pain. Outside our feet were insensitive and inside throbbing with pain."

And what was it like to stay the night in such conditions? Swami Prabodhanandji writes, "It was impossible to get a wink of sleep in the bone-chilling and numbing glaciers that were like transparent glass. And yet we had no other recourse but to spend a night on the frigid, deathly surface of the glacier. Before the night would end there was a possibility that we would all freeze like a horn and by morning none of us would be able to open our eyes at all."

The glacier surface is hard but inside one may find slush and mud that act like quicksand, swallowing a person once he falls in it. The fog makes walking difficult. Prabodhanand Swami and his team, though connected with ropes, experienced a fall in a mud-slush hole. He writes, "As we were advancing, Dalipsingh, our guide, suddenly collapsed into a waist-deep pool of mud and slush. We quickly pulled him out. Then when we had progressed a little further the ice broke again and he fell into another pool. The glacier had an ankle-deep layer of snow on it. It was impossible to tell where the ice would break and plunge one into a pool of mud and slush. Furthermore, the fog was so dense that one could grab a fistful and could not know where our guide had fallen. We knew he was in grave difficulty and anxiety. Then we heard his voice, 'Don't move one step from where you are. We are all on the edge of a crevasse. I can see no bottom to it!'

"We were all fixed in a dangerous position. We were like an advancing caterpillar suddenly with its hind part anchored to the edge of a branch and its front part exploring in mid-air!

"Then we had to cross a third sea of ice. Again we came across mud and slush pools. Every step was full of adversities. In all we managed through 10 to 15 mud-

slush pools without losing our patience and with great care and alertness.

"At one point Dalipsingh shouted from behind us, 'Now move to your right. Untie your ropes. Walk freely. There is no need to walk connected to each other.' We did as we were told. Dalipsingh then went up front rolling the rope together. We again came across a path laden with stones and rocks. As evening came the thick fog suddenly changed into a black cloud. We could not see the person in front. Large chunks of snow came raining down. There was a blitzkrieg of snow, glacier, mud-slush pools and thunderbolts."[40]

From the above narration one cannot but be left wondering as to how Nilkanth had crossed Mana Ghat in even more terrible conditions during February. Another deathly obstacle that Nilkanth must have faced were avalanches. Avalanches and landslides are common in this terrain. Travellers are in constant danger of landslides.

Edwin T. Atkinson in the *Himalayan Gazetteer* writes about the dangers of Mana Ghat, "The necessity of travelling for many miles over the vast accumulations of loose rock and debris brought down by ancient glaciers, or which violent atmospheric changes have thrown down into the valley from the mountains on both sides, render the Mana Pass one of the most difficult in this part of the Himalaya."[41]

Swami Prabodhanand and guide Dalipsingh explain their experiences of avalanches and landslides,[42] "Now we have entered the region where the snow and glaciers have not melted since ages. The sides of the glacier we were walking on were touching high walls of ice and snow. Suddenly we heard loud rumbling sounds from the mountain peaks. Was it the sound of rain or was it the clouds! There was no need for an answer. Up high from the mountain slopes we saw huge boulders of snow

hurtling down. The boulders of snow filled the slopes of the mountain on its way down. The snow attacked aggressively, filling the curb of the path which we had passed a few minutes before. This we saw with our naked eyes! It was an avalanche. It occurs every day.

"But before we could regain our senses from that phenomena, in a single eye blink, dark black clouds suddenly descended upon us from over the peaks. The onslaught of rain and hail temporarily blinded us all. Our next camp site was only two 'farms' away. We made courageous efforts to reach it, but simply couldn't do it!

"Our silent, naked sadhu and the rest of our friends shivered as if stricken by a terrible, cold fever. Our eyes and noses leaked copiously. Our beards and moustaches turned white because of snow. The air from our mouths turned into white smoke and then immediately into ice particles. Without any other option, we set up our tent by the rock wall on the glacier, wrapping our shivering friends to sleep!

"We were terribly thirsty. But from where could we get water. Everywhere around us there was only snow and ice. There was fresh snow falling constantly. I went out to look for a small water hole. And, I soon found one. I filled the glass and started drinking. But I couldn't drink even a mouthful. So I drank a little, drop by drop. I filled it again and came to the tent.

"The cold was biting us like an attacking dog. I was worried about my friends exposed to the cold. An ice cap formed over my open head."[43]

It is chilling to imagine as to how Nilkanth must have travelled from Mt. Satopanth and crossed Mana Ghat through the severe winter cold, avalanches and landslides. It can be crossed only between July and September. Among all its chal-

lenging hardships is its height. The Mana Ghat lies at 18,400 ft. above sea level. While passing through at that height Swami Prabodhanand writes, "We felt tired even when we talked briefly and softly. The air at 18,000 ft. and above is so thin that even in the supine position we gasped for air while breathing. While climbing we breathed like bellows. After every third step we stopped and inhaled nine times. Our body, soul and vital airs were simply exhausted. Each step we made was accomplished with great labour and pain.

"Our mind was really numbed. How could we travel without a compass in this vast, endless ocean of snow! Where should we turn! So we endeavoured with our last resources. The terrible fiery reflection of the afternoon sun on the snow blinded our eyes and left them in a painful state! On travelling without wearing reflective goggles for three days, our eyes pained dangerously and drained with water. We couldn't even open them enough to see the road. And as if this was less, the intense fog returned again and enveloped us. We couldn't even see each other!

"When we descended we felt our eyes had films of fog layered on it. Hence, whatever we saw appeared double or treble. We could not even recognise whether there was a human or an animal a short distance away! The snow's bright reflection distorts or damages vision. And the distortion endures for upto two to three weeks. Permanent damage is however very rare."[44] (Translated from Gujarati script.)

Nilkanth must have faced the extremes of the winter climate while crossing the Mana Ghat. Thereafter he walked at an altitude of 12,500 ft. for 20 miles, then climbed to 16,400 ft. to cross Charang Ghat.[45]

Nilkanth Enters the Tibetan Plains

After crossing Mana Ghat, Nilkanth walked for four days to reach a Buddhist hermitage called Thhuling Math (12,200 ft.), which is 160 km of mountainous terrain from Badrinath. From here Nilkanth entered the Tibetan Plains which are at a height of 12-14,000 ft. By inference Nilkanth must have visited and stayed at the Thhuling Math.[46] We don't have any information about whether the inmates were staying in February or during the winter months. The reason why Nilkanth may have visited the Thhuling Math is that it was formerly the seat of Lord Badri. And Nilkanth would have never missed visiting such a historic pilgrim place.

Swami Tapovanji writes about the Thhuling Math, "The main residing *murti* is of Bhagwan Buddha... The lamas of this monastery say the *murti* of Buddha is in fact that of Badrinarayan. This is the original place, but because of its inaccessibility and harsh terrains it was changed to the present place of Badrinath that is over the mountain on a lower altitude."[47]

A problem that pilgrims faced while travelling to Thhuling Math was of some wild, unruly local people. They lived in mountain caves or in huts set up in the mountain valley. They were giant in size, robbing and even killing travellers and pilgrims. In 1838 these wild locals killed the famous British researcher and traveller Dr. William Moorcroft near Mansarovar.[48] Swami Tapovanji writes about these wild, meat-eating people, "Sheep and cows are slaughtered unchecked in Tibet. So it is natural that the heaps of bones, hooves and horns that one finds along the way are appalling. These people eat raw meat."[49] (That is why the Purans have mentioned them as *pishachos* – evil people.)

From Thhuling Math to Mansarovar the trail is full of ice cold winds. The boisterous rivers and channels that cross the trail are without bridges. This makes it diffi-

cult for pilgrims to cross. The only way is by wading through chest-deep cold water and risking one's life.

A century ago, in 1900, Ramsharan Vidyarthi, a well-known advocate and Delhi-based author writes about his journey in this terrain, "You do not find any animals nor any lush trees here. Everywhere an extremely deathly cold wind hovers over you. And every second the fear of dacoits prevails in your heart. So the cold and the dacoits, who are like death, are the sources of constant fear. The currents of water and air are too strong. They flow unchecked and unbridled. In this lifeless, dead, terrifying, unknown 'jungle' we advanced on ponies at a very slow pace. From morning till evening we travelled in absolute silence, lost in self-introspection and half conscious in this stunningly noiseless 'forest'. In this land created by God one cannot see any trace of human. Everywhere there is one colour, a desolate path that rolls ahead unchanging and certain. In this semi-conscious state before my mental eye I saw in the countless rocks a lustre similar to the stars in the sky. God's light remains aflame."[50]

The terrain ahead of Thhuling Math is predominantly full of rocky plains. At 12,000 to 14,000 ft. this desolate terrain is subject to sudden turbulent weather changes that leaves any traveller subdued. Ramsharan Vidyarthi describes further, "When we were preparing to rest for the night the prevailing peace started taking on a deathly form. In reality this peace was an indication of a destructive storm or blizzard. We all entered and sat in our own tents, shocked and amazed. Whilst looking we saw a blue sky transform into a white sky. Quietly and peacefully it started snowing. The ground became covered by a carpet of snow. Our sight was filled with the donning of a full-fledged coat of thick white (snow). All the trees and plants were covered in snow. Even sheep, goats and cows were covered with the white fabric of

snow."[51]

The snowfall then turns turbulent into a deathly blizzard. In 1906 and 1908 the Swedish traveller, Sven Hedin, faced many such difficulties in the course of his journey to Mansarovar. His description in his book, *Trans Himalaya,*[52] of destructive blizzards is hair-raising. Sven Hedin lost twelve horses and men. Sometimes when the yaks, used for transport, turn violent and attack humans, lives are lost. Sven Hedin lost his guide because of a yak attack. Despite being fully equipped with materials and men, Sven Hedin just about managed to complete his travellings. It is amazing how Nilkanth, a young, tender boy of only eleven years managed to negotiate, bear and overcome the challenges he met on his way to Mansarovar.

The path from Thhuling Math to Mansarovar is approximately at an altitude of 14,000 ft. In the mild seasons one finds small markets (mandis) of five to twenty-five tents dotted along the way. During the winter season the markets disappear, with its owners doing business on more favourable grounds.

On advancing from Thhuling Math to Mansarovar Nilkanth must have passed through various places and rivers like Mangang (11 miles), Dapa (14 miles), Nabra Mandi (market) (6.5 miles), River Gomal Chhu (5.75 miles), River Dongpu (7.5 miles), River Dongu (19.5 miles), River Tisum (3.75 miles), Shibchilam Mandi (19 miles), Manithanga (7.25 miles), Gombachen (3.5 miles), River Guni Yankti (15 miles), River Dharma Yankti (3.75 miles), Gyanima Mandi (13 miles), Chhumikshala (16.5 miles) and others.[53] Having crossed the forbidding terrain Nilkanth must have also crossed the river Sutlej and arrived in Tarchhen, which lies at the foot of Mt. Kailas. With his journey in February, Nilkanth must have confronted heavy snowfalls and biting cold winds. One has to cross Tarchhen (15,100 ft.)[54] while travelling from

Thhuling Math towards Mansarovar. Tarchhen lies at the foot of Mt. Kailas (22,022 ft.) and northwest of Mansarovar. First one has the darshan of the beautiful, holy Mt. Kailas. The divine experience of Mt. Kailas transforms even the diehard atheist. The present day modern settlement in Tarchhen was not existent 200 years ago when Nilkanth visited it. According to the British traveller, Dr. William Moorcroft, who visited it in 1812, there were only four houses of unburnt brick or stones and about twenty-eight tents."[55]

NILKANTH'S PARIKRAMA OF MT. KAILAS

Pilgrims begin their *parikrama* (circumambulation) of Mt. Kailas from Tarchhen. With Nilkanth's travel route from Thhuling Math it seems that he may have embarked upon the *parikrama* of Mt. Kailas without first coming to Tarchhen. Though there is no information of Nilkanth's *parikrama* of Mt. Kailas in the scriptures or records of the Swaminarayan Sampraday, it seems that he must have performed it. The reason being that it would be easier for him to reach Mansarovar after completing the *parikrama*. Another reason being that people, then, considered it highly meritorious to do the *parikrama*, as people do today. Normally it takes three days to complete the *parikrama*.

Swami Tapovanji, who took the same route as Nilkanth, from Thhuling Math to Mansarovar, shares his experience of his *parikrama* of Mt. Kailas. He says, "In the sun's light the snow-capped peak of Mt. Kailas, which is 22,022 ft. high with a circumference of 28 to 30 miles, looked illustrious as silver. Its beauty was matchless and divine. To perform the *parikrama* of Kailas on rough grounds, replete with rocks, water and snow, and in the severe cold of 18,000 to 19,000 ft. altitude is truly a test of one's austerity and faith.

"On advancing six to seven miles from Tarchhen we reached Chakku Lamaserai (a Buddhist monastery). After a little rest we travelled about five miles to Dirfuk and rested for the night. It rained and snowed heavily at night. The view of Mt. Kailas from here is so clear that one does not find it anywhere else. So we did darshan of Kailas in the evening and morning. We left in the morning. In the beginning we had a very steep climb. The Dolma Ghat is at 18,600 ft. There is a beautiful lake called Gaurikund. It is believed that Parvati swims here. We trudged through the deep snow and reached the banks of the lake. The lake had scattered heaps of ice and on its surface was a two to three inch layer of transparent ice... While doing the *parikrama* we had to walk on the banks of fast flowing streams and in valleys of the world's highest mountains. And so our trek was a pious austerity. It is difficult to describe it all."[56]

The land of Kailas-Mansarovar is freezing cold and battered by howling winds. From November to May, along with heavy snowfalls and blizzards, there are tempestuous winds. The land is also subject to the vagaries of climate; where thick, black clouds suddenly and angrily pelt the terrain with ice and snow. Narrating his experiences of Kailas *parikrama*, Ramsharan Vidyarthi writes, "In certain places our feet easily sank into one to one-and-a-half feet of snow. The spread of snow is so much that one has to walk continuously on it for two to three furlongs. Then before one's eyes one can see a carpet of snow. The sight is very beautiful. On this place (Kailas) lies the origin of the river Sindhu. From the snow is born the river Sindhu. While walking on the countless icy boulders to reach Kailas we place every step with great care. After some time this exercise to advance further in this manner made us feel that we may lose our lives. We knew clearly that to walk ahead would be like drowning in ice.

"In these conditions we climbed four miles and reached Gaurikund. On the way

we had to walk on snow in many places and experienced difficulties in breathing. The headaches made our hearts anxious. The climbing ends at 18,600 ft...

"On the (mountain) top, to the right is a mirror-like, shining lake covered with ice that is approximately one furlong wide and three furlongs long. Beneath the two to three feet large lid of ice is a pool of water. One can see a patch of ice-free water on one side only. To take a dip in this lake is a matter of great courage or foolishness. To dip one's hand in its waters and then take it out is very difficult. Then who would dare to take a dip and come out dead! To come out of these waters is in reality to bring out a dead body. An old pundit in our team became numb. On coming out, contrary to the warnings from the guides, he loudly hailed the name of Umapati (Shivji) and became unconscious. Due to the cold his body seemed to be lifeless."[57]

When the pilgrims succeed in overcoming all the severe trials and difficulties the panoramic beauty of Mansarovar redeems them from all pain and suffering. Every pore is overwhelmed with joy. Mansarovar is 20 km southeast of Mt. Kailas. Swami Tapovanji writes, "After proceeding from Kailas towards Mansarovar, we had to cross many streams... Mansarovar is at a height of 15,000 ft. All around there are no plants, and it is surrounded by snow-capped black mountains. When the winds are turbulent the lake bristles with huge waves. And when the winds die then its deep, blue waters are calm. I do not believe that the beauty of this beautiful lake lies anywhere else on earth. At the time of dusk its beauty is so unique that philosophers experience samadhi."[58]

Nilkanth Varni's experience after circumambulating Mt. Kailas and arriving at Mansarovar was immensely different from that of Swami Tapovanji. The reason being that the winter time in which Nilkanth was there, the entire 518 sq. km Mansarovar was frozen.

O, what beauty Mansarovar must have donned, and at the same time how harsh and callous it must have been! In the succeeding pages let us look at Nilkanth's brief stay at Mansarovar.

Appendix-3

Nilkanth At Mansarovar: February 1793

Nilkanth arrived at Mansarovar in February 1793. During 1936-1937 a sannyasi called Swami Pranavananda spent one year at Mansarovar and another 16 months in 1943-44. He stayed through the entire winter to observe and experience the conditions in Mansarovar. To understand Nilkanth's stay it would be interesting to learn from Swami Pranavananda's scientific study.[59] He stayed equipped with all the necessities of clothes, food, fuel, medicines and wrote his experiences.

Prior to the onset of winter lamas or monks from eight Buddhist monasteries by the banks of Mansarovar migrate to lower regions. During winter Mansarovar becomes harsh and lifeless.

Swami Pranavananda describes his stay in winter, "When the author (Swami Pranavananda) sojourned on the shores of Mansarovar in 1936-37, winter had already begun to make itself felt from the middle of September. From 1 October onwards up to 14 May 1937, the minimum temperature persistently remained below freezing point. The maximum temperature during that year was 67°F (19.5°C) on 19 July, in the verandah of the room and the minimum was -18.5°F (-28°C). On 18 February, it was so cold that the sputum of a person standing in the balcony would reach the

ground as solid ice. The lowest maximum temperature was 2°F (-17.7°C) on 16 February. The maximum temperature remained below freezing point for nearly 3½ months; and on several occasions even at 12 in the noon the temperature would be 10°F (-12.2°C). Of course the winter of 1936-37 was unusually severe in the Kailas-Mansarovar Region...

"Occasional snowfalls began from the second week of September, but never more than 1½ feet on the shores of Mansarovar, although there were several feet of heavy snowfall round Kailas. Tempestuous winds began to howl in an ever-increasing manner from 1 November. From the middle of December, water near the edges of the Lake began to freeze to a width of about two feet. From the 21st water towards the middle of the Lake froze here and there to a thickness of 2 to 4 inches and sheets of ice about 50 to 100 yards in edge were drifting towards the shores. Cyclonic gales from the Mandhata peaks were giving rise to huge oceanic waves in the Lake roaring and thundering aloud...

"It was Monday, December 28, 1936... For over a mile from the shores, the waters in the Lake were frozen into milk-white ice all around. It was an unforgettable memorable sight – the middle of the Lake picturesquely, with its unfrozen deep blue waters quite calm and serene, reflected the Kailas and the snowy cap of the Ponri peak and the resplendent rays of the morning sun...

"By December 30, i.e. in full three days, the entire Lake (300 ft. deep and 518 sq. km.) was frozen like the mythological ocean of curds. But curiously enough Sven Hedin in his *Trans-Himalaya* reports that the whole of Mansarovar freezes over in an hour!"[60]

Swami Pranavananda also notes that in the winter of 1944 the Lake was frozen in only three days from January 9 to 12. The surface of Mansarovar was frozen with

ice that was two to six feet thick near the banks. The nearby lake called Rakshas Tal, 362.5 sq. km in size, is also completely frozen in winter.[61]

On 28 December 1936, when Swami Pranavanandaji came out of his meditation at 7.00 am onto the terrace of the monastery he lived in, he saw the frozen Mansarovar. He felt an instant thrill and lost consciousness for some time. He writes his experience in the third person, referring himself to 'he', "...stunned by the sight of the Holy Kailas on the north-west, piercing into the pitch-blue sky and dyed in amber robes of the early morning sun (which had not yet reached other places) and overlooking the Holy Lake in all majesty and dignity, bewitching even the inanimate creation. Not even a single sheep or lamb in the sheep-yard bleated. While he (Swami Pranavananda) was musing over the splendour and over-powering beauty of the Holy Mount, it rapidly changed several robes of various colours and hues and ultimately decided upon the usual perpetual silver garment, which was reflecting in the clear and calm blue mirror of the mid-Lake. Dazzled at the sight, he lowered his eyes towards the Lake that was just in front of him. The very first sight of the Holy Lake made him forget himself and even the Lake herself for some time, and by the time he could see the Lake again, the sun was sufficiently high on the eastern horizon... Oh! How happy he was! He utterly fails to describe the bliss he enjoyed and the mystic charm of the enchanting Lake. Tears of joy trickled down the cheeks, only to be frozen on the parapet. There was pin-drop silence everywhere. Like the eternal silence of Nirvana there was perfect stillness all around. What creature could there be on the face of earth which would not feel and become one with that sublime serenity of silence of the Almighty? He leaned against the parapet of the terrace and stood dumb-struck by the most enrapturing splendour and lustre of the sublime serenity of the spiritual aura of the two holiest places on the face of the earth. How fortunate he

felt himself to be under such a wonderful spell! Then he was lost within himself. At about 10 am he was roused by the hailing shouts of the villagers..."[62]

Both the Manas and the Rakshas freeze into pure white opaque ice in the beginning, and within a month or so they become transparent greenish blue.

The Freezing and Thawing of Mansarovar

When Nilkanth arrived in February at Mansarovar, after his *parikrama* of Mt. Kailas, the icing process of the lake was nearing completion. When he left in the first week of May the lake had started thawing. Let us now see the conditions of the lake during that season to allow us to understand what Nilkanth had gone through.

During the freezing process of the lake Swami Pranavananda writes that from 1 January the occasional rumblings begin. Then for a month, from 7 January, the sounds are more pronounced and terrible. Swami Pranavananda notes that when it freezes the level of the Lake falls 12 inches below the ice. The ice under its own weight cracks with big sounds and fissures are formed. These fissures or chasms are three to six feet broad, portioning the lake into a number of divisions. The water in the fissure then freezes in a day and breaks. Then the water beneath it freezes and pushes the blocks of ice up which pile up loosely over the chasms or cement themselves to either side of the fissures. These eruptions and fissures also form along the shores of the Lake. No one dares to walk on the frozen Mansarovar because of fear of falling inside the lake.[63]

Swami Pranavananda walked for over a mile into the lake. Then suddenly he came face to face with a big fissure-eruption that piled ice to a height of five feet. Since it was so sudden he crossed the fissure at great risk and with tremendous difficulty.[64]

Swami Pranavananda says that a month before the thawing of Mansarovar the sight is more fascinating than the freezing of the Lake. He writes, "A month before thawing sets in, along the west and south coasts, at the mouths of the Ding tso and the Tag, ice melts and forms a fine and picturesque blue border, 100 yards to half a mile in breadth, to the milk-white garment of the Lake. Here and there are seen pairs of graceful swans majestically sailing on the perfectly smooth surface of that border setting up small ripples on either side of their course. Especially in the mornings they do not play in the waters or engage themselves in 'belly-filling' but sail calmly towards the sun with half-closed eyes in a meditative mood and at the same time enjoying a good sun-bath. One such sight is a hundred times more effective, impressive, and sufficient to put one into a meditative mood than a series of artificial sermons, meditation classes, or got-up speeches from a pulpit. So it is that our ancestors and Rishis used to keep themselves in touch with Mother Nature to have a glimpse of the Grand Architect."[65]

The sounds of ice breaking are more intense and frightening in early spring (in May). Swami Pranavananda writes, "About 11 days before breaking, the disturbance in the Lake becomes most intense between 6 and 10 am and terrible sounds, rumblings, groanings, crashes resembling the roars of lions and tigers, trumpets of elephants, blowing up of mountains with dynamites, and firing of cannon are heard. One can hear notes of all sorts of musical instruments and cries of all animals. The agitation and the sounds are, in all probability, due to the ice tearing itself off and breaking asunder both in the fissures, and minor lines of cleavage, for, the chasms in the main fissures are seen 50 to 80 feet broad with blue waters."[66]

Even the most intrepid people would lose courage and heart amidst nature's fury in Kailas and Mansarovar. The sheer isolation and intolerable circumstances that

Nilkanth put up with is beyond imagination.

After surpassing and hurdling over nature's harshest challenges what did Nilkanth do when he reached the shores of Mansarovar? In *Shri Haricharitramrut Sagar,* Adharanand Swami (or Siddhanand Swami) writes that Nilkanth had bathed in the freezing waters of Mansarovar.[67] He bathed to offer his tribute to the residing deities of Mt. Kailas – Shri Shiv and Parvatiji. He bathed also to grant the fruits of those who had and those who would in future perform austerities and come on a pilgrimage here.

Nilkanth spent five days at Mansarovar as described in the Shri Haricharitramrut Sagar. But what did he do during that time?

In those times the Hindus and Buddhists considered it sacred to circumambulate Mansarovar and Mt. Kailas. In 1820 James Baillie Frazer writes, "...to journey round the Kailash mountain is reputed to be of as much efficacy as a pilgrimage to Loreto, or to Mecca, was to a Roman Catholic of former days, or to a Mussalman of the present... A journey round it which is reckoned a very necessary religious exercise..."[68]

In 1792, when Nilkanth pilgrimaged Mansarovar, two sannyasis, Purangiri and Purana Poori, had also performed the pilgrimage. They had described that the *parikrama* is a six day journey.[69] Other pilgrims have completed it in five days. Nilkanth stayed for five days in Mansarovar. It seems that with the number of days he stayed there, Nilkanth, who was inclined towards pilgrimage, must have circumambulated the Mansarovar. The circular *parikrama* is 87 km.

Shri Haricharitramrut Sagar notes that Nilkanth returned on Akha Trij, 13 May 1793, from his pilgrimage from Mansarovar to Badrinath.[70] Nilkanth started his pilgrimage from Badrinath, then went to Joshimath, Badrivan, Mansarovar and returned back to Badrinath six months later. Out of the six months, as mentioned

earlier, he spent three months in Badrivan and the remaining three months in the Mansarovar region.

Sannyasi Purana Poori, who had pilgrimaged in 1792, the same year as Nilkanth, writes that it takes about ten days to journey from Badrinath to Kailas-Mansarovar.[71] Swami Tapovanji has described the same number of days for the journey. So Nilkanth spent twenty days in going to Mansarovar and coming back to Badrinath, which are a part of his three-month sojourn in the Manas region.

How did Nilkanth live and survive during his 2½ months stay there? What did he do and where did he stay? And what did he eat for three months?

Do Nilkanth's descriptions of the royal swans of Mansarovar and of the entire region agree with recorded facts? The following research answers these questions.

How Did Nilkanth Survive?

How did Nilkanth survive in temperatures of -28°C and at an altitude of 15,000 ft. when no human being could survive without proper food, clothes and equipment? To answer this we need to consider two researches.

In the 18 April 2002 issue of *Harvard University Gazette* an article by William J. Cromie, 'Meditation Changes Temperatures', gives details about some interesting experiments conducted by Dr. Herbert Benson. Dr. Benson is an associate professor at the Harvard Medical School and President of Mind/Body Medical Institute at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston. He observed that under frigid conditions no human could survive, but through meditation, Indian yogis and Buddhist monks have spent whole nights. William Cromie writes, "Benson and his team studied monks living in the Himalayan mountains, who could by meditation, raise the temperature of their fingers and toes by as much as 17 degrees.

"In 1985, the meditation team made a video of monks drying cold, wet sheets with body heat. They also documented monks spending a winter night on a rocky ledge 15,000 feet high in the Himalayas. The sleep-out took place in February on the night of the winter full moon when temperatures reached -17.7°C. Wearing only woollen or cotton shawls, the monks promptly fell asleep on the rocky ledge. They did not huddle together and the video shows no evidence of shivering. They slept until dawn then walked back to their monastery."[72]

Dr. Benson, who has been studying the effects of meditation for 20 years, said that meditation decreases metabolism, breathing rate, heart rate and blood pressure.[73]

From Dr. Benson's research on yoga we can understand how Nilkanth must have faced temperatures of –28°C. Survival in such extreme cold through yoga is a scientific fact. This all the more resolves the doubts of sceptics and enquiring minds.

The interesting fact is that Nilkanth mastered *ashtang*-yoga in the Himalayan jungle a year after his pilgrimage to Kailas-Mansarovar. So, Nilkanth must have been a born yogi to have survived the extremities of cold.

Another interesting experience is that of Shri Tarun Vijay, a renowned writer in Hindi and editor of *Panchajanya* magazine. In 1992, during his pilgrimage to Kailas-Mansarovar, he came across a 26-27 year old sannyasi named Swami Vikasanand Giri near Tarchhen. At 15,000 ft. the sannyasi was walking barefoot and wearing ordinary cotton clothes. The shivering editor, Tarun Vijay, and his companions asked him whether he was feeling cold. Swami Vikasanand replied that through practice he did not feel the cold. He said there are certain herbs in Kailas which on eating would make one sweat in the cold.[74] Tarun Vijay asked for the herb and after receiving it they continued their *parikrama* of Kailas. When they had to cross the Dolma Ghat at 18,600 ft. the atmosphere was extremely cold. The chilly winds pierced through their

bodies. Due to fatigue and cold their confidence and courage began to ebb. After every two to three steps they had to take a break. Then they remembered the herbs of small white flowers given to them by Swami Vikasanand Giri. Despite doubting the herbs the cold made him take out 10-15 grams of flowers and eat them. Tarun Vijay narrates his experience that nothing happened immediately. But in half an hour he felt heat in every pore of his body as if he was warming himself with a furnace.[75]

Could Nilkanth have tried some herbs to keep himself warm? There is no reference to this in any of the books written about him in his times. But it is a fact that such herbs do help people to survive in the intense cold.

Nilkanth's Diet in The Manas Region

Another proof of Nilkanth being a born yogi was his diet. With reference to what he must have eaten in the three months of his Himalayan sojourn we find that "Himalaya had brought him fruits."[76] There is no reference in the Swaminarayan Sampraday's texts other than this. Nilkanth must have lived on fruits, leaves and roots that he found on the way. But are there any edible plants in the Mansarovar region? Not in winter when Nilkanth was present.

According to Swami Pranavananda's research there are no fruit growing trees or plants in this region. However, south of Mansarovar-Kailas towards Thhuling Math a wild plant called jimbu grows in abundance. The local Tibetans eat it as onions. A thorny plant called tarua bears a fruit that is used to make chutney. The Tibetan garlic, bathua, is also used by the locals. Around Mansarovar a variety of edible mushrooms grow and are readily consumed. Jira, a wild plant, is used in eating items. Generally, Tibetans are meat-eaters because the variety and quantity of edible plants are sparse.[77]

For Nilkanth, garlic, onions and meat were taboo, so there was nothing available for him to eat. And since he travelled in winter there were no plants or herbs available! Then what did Nilkanth eat during his pilgrimage to Mansarovar and Kailas!

Let us see the words he said to the priest of Badrinath on returning back from his pilgrimage on Akha Trij, six months later, "I ate food here the last time, and now after six months of pilgrimage I am eating food here again."[78]

It is amazing that Nilkanth sustained his existence without food in such harsh and extreme circumstances.

The Royal Swans and Nature's Beauty at Mansarovar

From the Pauranic times the royal swans of Mansarovar have been a subject of great curiosity for Indians. Did Nilkanth see the swans at Mansarovar?

Yes! The *Shri Haricharitramrut Sagar* says that Nilkanth saw the swans swim in Mansarovar.[79] The year and season in which Nilkanth pilgrimaged to Mansarovar was the coldest time of the year. All around there was snow and ice. When the temperature of the verandah outside the rooms was -28°C, how could there be any signs of birds outside!

Swami Pranavananda says, "In connection with swans it may be noted that there are three varieties of aquatic birds in Manas Region. The first is called ngangba in Tibetan, which to the mind of the author, corresponds to the traditional swan... It is about 30 inches in length and is called savan in the United Provinces. (This is the bar-headed goose of Jerdon). The great poet Kalidas must have seen some stray Siberian mute swan or the whooper swan in Kashmir and combined its description with that of the Tibetan ngangba to give a beautiful poetic description of the Royal Swans or Raja Hansas in his celebrated Kavya, the *Meghadut,* as hailing from the

Manasa-saras. Having known this convention of the modern ornithologist and the Indian ornithologists and poets there should be no objection in calling the Manas-ngangba, the swan.

"The second variety of bird, called ngaru-serchung is deep or almond-brown in complexion... This is the brahminy duck. The third variety is chakarma and is deep grey or like a pigeon in colour. It is the gull."[80]

In support of Nilkanth having seen the swans we can see further in Swami Pranavananda's notes, "On January 18 when the minimum temperature in the verandah of the room was 2°F (-16.6°C), and when the entire Lake was covered with ice 2 to 6 feet thick, two scores of brahminy ducks were merrily swimming and playing in the pool and on the ice nearby. This makes the author conclusively believe that there must be some hot springs in the bed of the Mansarovar."[81]

Swami Pranavananda says that a month before the melting of Mansarovar begins on the blue border of water, which is 100 yards to half a mile in breadth, graceful swans swim creating ripples on either side. "Especially in the mornings they do not play in the waters or engage themselves in 'belly-filing' but sail calmly towards the sun with half-closed eyes in a meditative mood and at the same time enjoying a good sun-bath..."[82]

Nilkanth saw the swans as noted in the *Shri Haricharitramrut Sagar,* "There were many swans on the shores. They sang beautifully. It seemed as if the sages were meditating."[83]

Ramsharan Vidyarthi, the Hindi scholar, says, "In reality the swans are the undisputed kings of the Lake. No one could challenge this right of theirs."[84]

The *Shri Haricharitramrut Sagar* says that Nilkanth saw many other birds.[85] Swami Pranavanandaji writes that there were brahminy ducks, geese, gulls, herons

and others.[86]

In 1992 Tarun Vijay observed pigeons and small birds at Dolma Ghat at 18,600 ft."[87]

The authenticity of the description in *Shri Haricharitramrut Sagar* is evident from the above references. The scripture further describes the Manas region in which, "Nilkanth saw a variety of trees here."[88]

In Tibetan books one finds the description of trees around the Mansarovar.[89] In 1792 a sannyasi called Purana Poori noted trees of Bhojpatra on Mt. Kailas.[90] Today, one finds small plants scattered by the banks of Mansarovar but there are no trees. In all probability the trees growing at the time of Nilkanth's visit may now have been destroyed in time due to some drastic geographical disturbances or changes.

Swami Pranavananda notes the flora of the Manas region, mentioning the fragrant flowering plants and creepers. One such sweet-scented plant is called artemisia, popularly known as davanam, which is used as incense. Due to these fragrant flowers and creepers the air is also laden with its aroma. On the mountain sides of Mt. Kailas many fragrant flowers enthuse the minds of pilgrims.[91]

Shri Haricharitramrut Sagar also describes the air that Nilkanth experienced at Mansarovar, "The cold fragrant wind flows."[92]

Nilkanth also saw red lotuses in Mansarovar, but observations of pilgrims and researchers note no existence of them in the Lake. But there are records of other red flowers.[93]

Where Did Nilkanth Stay?

With Nilkanth's five-day stay at Mansarovar and twenty-day journey to and from the Lake, where did he spend the remaining two months? Where did Nilkanth

stay at Mansarovar? There are no records in the Sampraday's scriptures, but on the basis of some studies we can arrive at several possibilities.

The first possibility is that he could have stayed at one of the Buddhist monasteries or caves near the Lake.

In 1715, a Jesuit priest named Father Desideri had embarked upon a mission to go to the origin of the rivers Sindhu and Ganga. On reaching Mansarovar he observed, "...they (Tibetans) make pilgrimages from time to time to this district and wander round the lake with great devotion."[94] But Father Desideri makes no note of any Buddhist monasteries.

But in the 1798 edition of the Anglo-Indian periodical *Asiatic Researches* article, '*An Account of Two Fakeers*' by Mr. Jonathan Duncan gives an account of sannyasi Purana Poori's (of Kashi) adventures in 1792. About his observations on Mansarovar Purana Poori says, "Its circumference is of six days journey and around it are twenty or twenty-five goumaris (religious stations or temples)."[95]

Is it possible that Nilkanth stayed in these temples? And when Nilkanth visited Mansarovar were there any Buddhist monks in the temples at that time? No information is available in this regard. But it seems that since the Tibetans were meat-eaters Nilkanth would not have stayed in their monasteries and temples.

In 1902, a little over one hundreds years ago, Ramsharan Vidyarthi notes the characteristics of the ancient monasteries that were dotted near Mansarovar, "All around Mansarovar there are Buddhist monasteries. They are known as gumfas, meaning a place of solitude. Here the gumfas are different from each other in many ways; but you find them all dirty because the main diet of the (Buddhist) monks is goat and sheep meat. You find piles of bones spread badly around."[96]

"Here, the majority of wandering locals survive on meat. Their predominant

occupation is tending to yaks, goats and wool-making. Here you find only Buddhist monasteries but no other buildings or houses... These places are full of dirt and darkness."[97]

With the above mentioned conditions in the monasteries, it seems that Nilkanth, who was a vegetarian and inclined towards non-killing, would not have stayed there. He may have stayed in a cave or under the open sky. Furthermore, Nilkanth could have travelled to other places in the Manas region. What are the other places he could have visited?

Pilgrimage to the Origin of River Saryu

Nilkanth bathed in the holy river Saryu during his childhood years. He knew that the river originated from the Mansarovar region. So, because of his love for the river he had a desire to go to its source. *Shri Haricharitramrut Sagar* notes that Nilkanth had pilgrimaged to the place of origin of river Saryu.[98]

But where is the source of river Saryu?

The Skand Puran and other Indian Puranic literature shows that the river Saryu has its source in Mansarovar.[99]

Sven Hedin, the Swedish explorer, writes in his book *Trans-Himalaya,* "William Moorcroft was a veterinary surgeon (British). His name is famous in connection with Mansarovar, and his narrative of the journey he undertook with Captain Hearsey in 1812.

"On August 6, 1812, Moorcroft walked along the shore of Mansarovar to Chiugompa, and mounted a hill on its southern side. He looked in vain for an outlet. As far as the eye could perceive through the field glass there was no depression between the two lakes (Mansarovar and Rakshas Tal), no interruption in the hills. He sent

scouts to the southern shore, and they returned with the news that no drainage stream issued from the Lake."[100] So Moorcroft observed no river issuing from the Mansarovar.

In 1765 the German Jesuit father Joseph Tieffenthaler writes that the river Saryu issues from Rakshas Tal (next to Mansarovar), "Besides the large lake Mansarovar and on its west side is the Lanka lake (Rakshas Tal)... This lake, out of which on the west the Saryu River flows, is much smaller than Mansarovar."[101]

Sannyasi Purana Poori notes that the river Saryu flows from Lunkadh (Rakshas Tal).[102]

In 1796, four years after Nilkanth's pilgrimage, "...an old pundit named Harvallabh, who was Moorcroft's companion on his journey, assured him before they reached the lake that a watercourse issued from Mansarovar, entered the Rakshas Tal, and left it again on the western shore as the (river) Sutlej."[103]

However, geographers believe that the reference of river Saryu's origin in the Puran scriptures could be true. They believe that earthquakes cause geographical changes. So the source of river Saryu has shifted away from Mansarovar. Many researches believe that the underground waters of Mansarovar is the subterranean source of river Saryu.

Swami Pranavanandaji, who pilgrimaged to Mansarovar thirty-two times and noted authentic geographical information on the origin of rivers Sindhu, Sutlej, Saryu and Brahmaputra writes, "...the source of the Karnali (Saryu) is in the spring of Mapcha Chungo (near Mt. Mandhata), about 30 miles (48 km) south-east of Mansarovar and the genetic source is in the Lampiya pass."[104]

Two hundred years ago when Nilkanth pilgrimaged in the Himalayas, he also explored and went to the source of the river Saryu. Going to its source was extremely

challenging and full of obstacles. But a determined Nilkanth explored in the biting winter month, reached the source and took a dip in the river Saryu. And further, it is a possibility that Nilkanth may have also gone to the sources of the other three great rivers, namely, Sutlej, Sindhu and Brahmaputra and sanctified them too. The courageous effort of Nilkanth's solitary journey till May in the Manas region to the sources of the four rivers must have been very thrilling and extraordinary.

The *Shri Haricharitramrut Sagar* notes how the priest of Badrinath was amazed with Nilkanth when he gave an account of his six-month sojourn to the Himalayas.[105] If the priest had recorded Nilkanth's narration then it would have proved to be of priceless value and source of inspiration for adventurers, explorers and spiritual seekers.

Conclusion

Nilkanth's pilgrimage was not a fable or a myth. It is a fact and a historic journey. Nilkanth was not an ordinary human being, but the supreme divinity who walked in flesh and blood. His journey to Kailas-Mansarovar, with parallels drawn from the accounts of sannyasis, explorers and modern scientific research, clearly places him in a unique league of his own. His divine charisma is evident from his resolve and effort in realising his mission. Probably, with further research one may come up with more interesting and unknown facts that would make Nilkanth's journey even more amazing to the human mind and heart.

But the fact remains that Nilkanth's intrepid journey to Kailas-Mansarovar was unique and unimaginable. His journey was not only adventurous and courageous but a spiritual and divine exercise for the elevation and good of countless souls. His pilgrimage was rooted in his infinite compassion for humanity and all souls, providing

for centuries to come to innumerable aspirants and seekers of truth, the strength and inspiration to bear all types of adversities. He also pilgrimaged to bless all those who had and were engaged in austerities with the fruits of their spiritual endeavours. For this the world will forever remain indebted to Nilkanth, the child yogi!

His Divine Holiness Pramukh Swami Maharaj has inspired the making of a fantastic Imax film on Nilkanth's pilgrimage. The Imax film, Mystic India, reveals the unique persona of Nilkanth and the glory of India. It is the greatest tribute that anyone could pay to Nilkanth's extraordinary journey. Through Pramukh Swami Maharaj's colossal effort and divine blessings in creating the Swaminarayan Akshardham Complex in New Delhi millions of people throng to see Nilkanth's divine pilgrimage through the Imax film and experience a glimpse of his great, historic life.

APPENDIX-4

NILKANTH VARNI FROM KEDARNATH TO BADRINATH AND BADRINATH TO GANGOTRI

At the tender age of eleven Nilkanth Varni travelled alone in the northern region of India (Uttarakhand). He started his upward pilgrimage to Kedarnath from Rishikesh and then went to Badrinath. From Badrinath he embarked upon an extremely arduous and difficult journey to Badrivan in the beginning of winter. Nilkanth stayed there for three months and then travelled through the most dangerous and frigid terrains of the world to Kailas and Mansarovar. From Mansarovar Nilkanth Varni returned to Badrinath after six months. From here he started another challenging pilgrimage to Gangotri (10,000 ft.).

We shall look at the conditions and hardships Nilkanth must have faced through the experiences of other explorers.

Nilkanth's trek route in the Himalayan pilgrim places (Uttarakhand) was different from today's roads and trekking pathways. The route of his journey by foot was extremely difficult and unimaginable.

When Nilkanth left Rishikesh on 16 September 1792 towards Kedarnath, he travelled through the towns and villages of Devprayag, Rudraprayag, Gupta Kashi, Triyuginarayan and Gaurikund. The *Shri Haricharitramrut Sagar* describes

Nilkanth's journey with all the names and the number of days he stayed at the pilgrim places he passed on his way to Kedarnath (as mentioned above). Today's route from Rishikesh to Kedarnath is the same as it was in Nilkanth Varni's time. But Nilkanth had two options for his journey from Kedarnath to Badrinath.

Route 1: Kedarnath, Gaurikund, Triyuginarayan, Gupta Kashi, Rudraprayag Chamoli, Joshimath, Vishnuprayag and Badrinath.

Route 2: This narrow path by foot was used less by pilgrims: Kedarnath, Gaurikund, Gupta Kashi, Ukhimath, Chopta, Gopeshwar, Chamoli, Joshimath and Badrinath.[106]

Nilkanth, instead of choosing from one of the above two routes, blazed a new trail altogether. *Shri Haricharitramrut Sagar* notes, "In the Himalayas at Kedarnath there is a big mandir of Mahadev. Brahmachari (Nilkanth) took the direction behind Kedarnath towards Badrinath. He reached Badrinath after nine days."[107]

So, Nilkanth, instead of taking the two familiar and popular routes one and two (as mentioned above, where one passes through the pilgrim places of Ukhimath, Gopeshwar, Joshimath, etc., went around the mountain behind Kedarnath towards Badrinath.

Now let us look at the geography of this region.

The description in *Shri Haricharitramrut Sagar* is very clear. It says that to the north of Kedarnath lies Mt. Kedarnath. It seems that Nilkanth had trekked around Mt. Kedarnath towards Badrinath. But is there such a path or way? And to circle around Mt. Kedarnath Nilkanth would have to cross the Chhodabari and Dudhganga glaciers. Further ahead he would have to pass through the Kirti glacier and a clear yellow glacier that lies in a valley between Mt. Kedarnath (22,769 ft.) and Mt. Meru (21,919 ft.). After traversing these glaciers one reaches the

Gangotri glacier. After crossing it one has to walk in the valley of the Bhagirath mountain range to reach Nandanvan. Then by crossing the Chaturangi glacier and the subsequent Kalindi Ghat (19,567 ft.) one arrives in the valley where the river Arva flows on the Arva glacier. On walking along the banks of river Arva the latter merges into the river Alaknanda near Gastoli. Then on walking 11.5 km south from here one arrives at Badrinath.

It seems that Nilkanth travelled on this route. Despite the simple description of the route, in reality, it is nothing but full of harsh terrains and insurmountable difficulties. Any adventurous and enterprising traveller or pilgrim would never be able to source enough courage to do it alone. Such are the perils and impossibilities of this land. It took Nilkanth nine days to travel a distance of 125 km over seven glaciers. This means that Nilkanth could barely cover nine to twelve kilometres every-day.

When Nilkanth first arrived at Badrinath he stayed there for twenty days. Then he stayed at Joshimath for a few days before embarking upon his pilgrimage to Mansarovar on 17 October 1792. After six months he returned to Badrinath (as described in previous articles). But his return to Badrinath was not the end of his pilgrimage.

When Nilkanth returned to Badrinath it was 13 May 1793, Akha Trij. From here Nilkanth decided to go to Gangotri. And the only one known path was to descend to Joshimath again and go to Chamoli, Gupta Kashi, Triyuginarayan, Buddha Kedar and finally Gangotri. But the *Shri Haricharitramrut Sagar* describes and points to something different altogether.

When Nilkanth returned to Badrinath after his pilgrimage to Mansarovar he met Maharaja Ranjitsinh of Punjab. The king was captivated by the divine person-

ality of Nilkanth. Out of adulation for Nilkanth he requested him to come to his kingdom. But Nilkanth refused. When the king and his party were about to leave for Joshimath and travel to Haridwar he asked Nilkanth again to come with him. But Nilkanth wanted to go to Gangotri. If Nilkanth had wanted to take the known path to Gangotri then he would have descended with Maharaja Ranjitsinh to Joshimath. But Nilkanth, instead, decided to take a different route to Gangotri.[108]

Now the question is which different route did Nilkanth take?

Nilkanth took the same route he had taken while coming from Kedarnath to Badrinath. The path was geographically familiar to him because he had travelled on it during his journey from Kedarnath to Badrinath. Then on reaching the Gangotri glacier he travelled towards the source of river Ganga at Gaumukh and then to Gangotri.

The path from Badrinath to Gangotri is extremely challenging and deadly. On the way, it is very hazardous to cross the Kalindi Ghat at 19,567 ft.[109] About 125 years after Nilkanth's journey, when a European traveller called Bernie had travelled on the same route from Badrinath to Gangotri with guides and necessary paraphernalia the local people of the Garhwal region were amazed. In comparison it is intensely fascinating as to how Nilkanth, who at the age of only twelve, wearing a loincloth, barefooted and with no materials or means whatsoever, pilgrimaged alone to Gangotri. His is an unparalleled story of courage, confidence, determination and divinity.

To understand the depth of Nilkanth's pilgrimage it would suffice to read the experiences of Swami Prabodhanand.[110] We have quoted the experiences of Swami Prabodhanand in the previous articles. The description of his experiences of the entire

pilgrimage is awe-inspiring.

A Unique Pilgrimage to The Source of The Ganga

For millennia mother Ganga has been nourishing India with her pristine, divine waters. The holy river is central to the faith of all Hindus. It is worshipped by thousands with *arti* everyday; its waters are sprinkled to drive away evil spirits and all that which is inauspicious and impure; and millions of Hinḍus vest their faith in its redemptory powers. It is difficult to evaluate the glory that mother Ganga has for all Hindus.

Out of a challenging curiosity and glory for Ganga were born many explorers and pilgrims. They endeavoured to the source of the boisterous river Ganga. But their odysseys through the soaring Himalayan peaks and valleys were stories of human courage and tragedy. Despite the adversities and challenges, the mission of discovering the source of river Ganga four centuries ago was so important that the then Mughal ruler, King Akbar, at the end of the 16th century, commissioned a team.[111] Then with the advent of the British, who came under the pretext of trade and then ruled India, many Europeans trekked in the Himalayan mountains to find the river's origin. In the 17th and 18th centuries many explorers lost their lives. Then history remains mute till the 19th century as to how many and who had reached the source of river Ganga. The renowned 19th century writer T.N. Colebrook writes in his 1812 research paper '*On the Source of the Ganges in the Himadri or Emodus*' that the source of river Ganga was a burning issue.[112] So many explorers had died or were proved wrong in finding the source of the mighty Ganga. Historians testify that till the beginning of the 19th century no one was successful in finding the source of Ganga. The reason being that the path from

Gaumukh to Gangotri (21 km) was extremely difficult and dangerous. Even today, with all the required equipment and arrangements for the journey one experiences, to some extent, the challenges it poses. Another reason in not finding the source was due to Pauranic beliefs. According to tradition, Hindus believe that Ganga flows from Lord Shiv's head. The Matsya Puran says, "Bhagirathi Ganga flows from Lake Mandod which lies in the valley of Mt. Kailas." (Matsya Puran, Ch. 214.) The great poet Kalidas writes in *Meghdut* (Purva Megh, 65) that Ganga flows from Mt. Kailas. Hence the Hindus have come to believe that the source of river Ganga lies on Mt. Kailas or Mansarovar. Hence, many Hindus, regardless of the hardships, dangers and possibilities of death, pilgrimaged to Mansarovar to find the source of Ganga. Even foreign traders and rulers, too, travelled to find the source of Ganga. The map of Tibet, by French traveller, D'Anville, in 1733, called, 'Carte Générale Du THIBET', shows that "...the Ganges issues from Mansarovar."[113]

Two hundred years ago, sannyasi Purangir went to Gangotri in search of the source of Ganga. "Purangir believed that the Ganges had its source on Kailas and flowed thence to Mansarovar."[114]

Sven Hedin, the Swedish explorer, writes in his book *Trans-Himalaya,* "The source of the Ganges was discovered in 1808... The expedition was accomplished by Lieutenant Webb and the captains Raper and Hearsey.[115] It followed the track of Antonio de Andrade. Two hundred years earlier this trekker on his way over Mana pass to Tsaparang had, without knowing it, passed by the source of the Ganges. The source of the Indus, Sutlej, and Brahmaputra neither Catholic missionaries nor any one else had passed before the year 1907.

"The instructions given to Lieutenant Webb by the supreme Government of

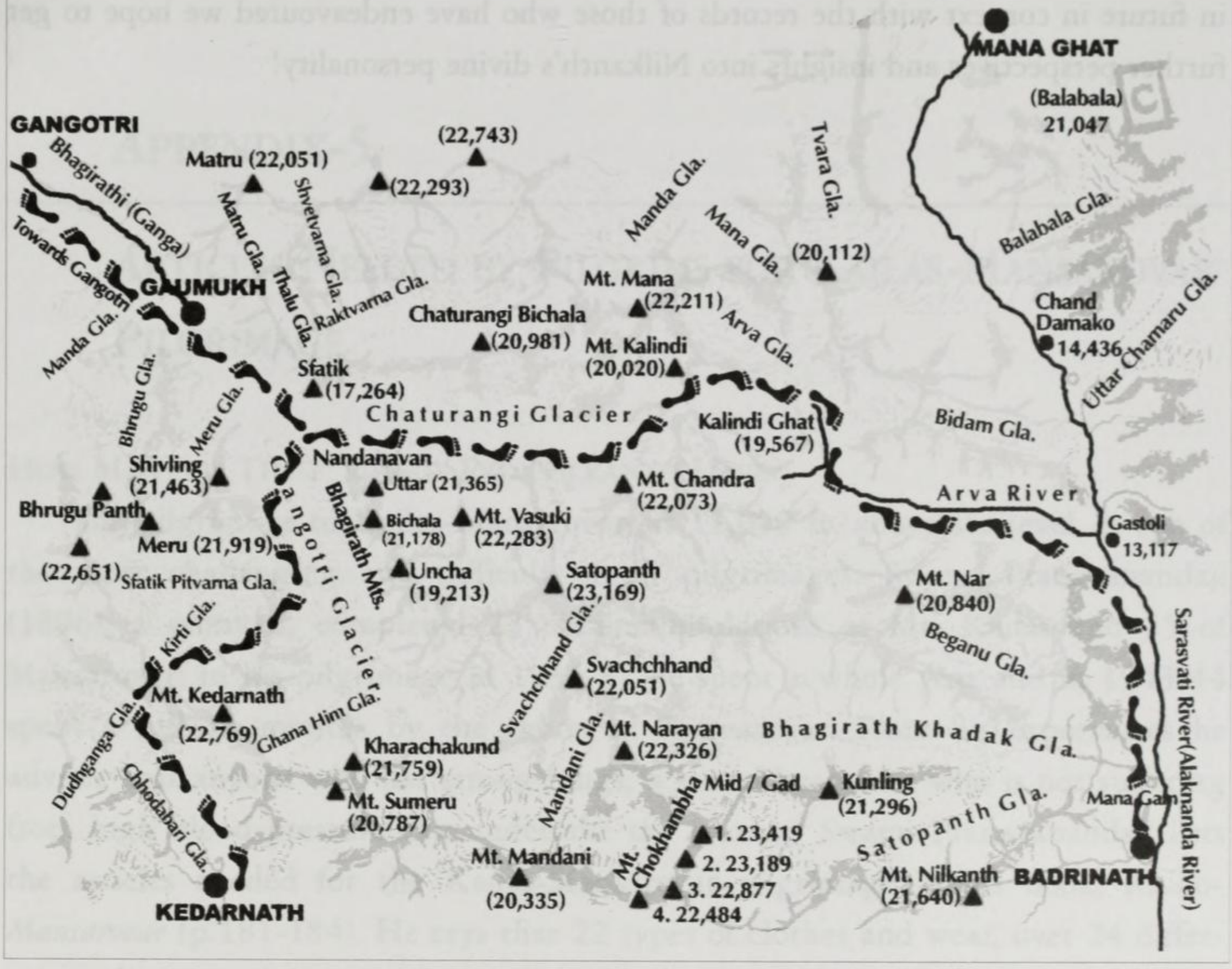
Bengal contain the following paragraph: 'To ascertain whether this (i.e. the cascade or subterraneous passage at Gangotri) be the ultimate source of the Ganges; and in case it should prove otherwise, to trace the river, by survey, as far towards its genuine source as possible. To learn, in particular, whether, as stated by Major Rennell, it arises from the Lake Manasarobar; and, should evidence be obtained confirming his account, to get, as nearly as practicable, the bearing and distance of that lake.' "[116]

At this point it is necessary to mention again that history should note that fifteen years earlier than Lieutenant Webb and his party 12-year-old Nilkanth had reached the source of river Ganga alone and without any means and wearing only a loincloth. The path that Nilkanth had taken on his journey from Badrinath to Gangotri is the path to the source of river Ganga.

The river Ganga's source lies at Gaumukh (a gorge shaped like a 'cow's mouth'), that is 21 km east of Gangotri. But the 18th century Jesuit father Joseph Tieffenthaler "...affirms that it (the source) will never be discovered because the way beyond the gorge of the 'cow's mouth' (gaumukh) is impassable."[117] Nilkanth had travelled beyond the gorge and reached Gaumukh. Then he walked from its source, along its banks to Haridwar.

Sven Hedin writes, "The envoys (sent by King Akbar at the end of the 16th century) saw the water of the river (Ganga) gush out in great abundance in a ravine under a mountain which resembled a cow's head... English explorers, however were soon to establish the fact that the information which Akbar's envoys brought to their master was correct."[118]

No British and European historians and writers have noted as to whether any sannyasi or sadhu had reached the source of the Ganga at Gaumukh. There is a pos-



About 212 years ago an eleven-year-old boy, Nilkanth, pilgrimaged the thoughest and most difficult mountainous terrains full of glaciers and snow from Kedarnath to Badrinath and then via Mana Ghat to Kailas-Mansarovar. On returning to Badrinath Nilkanth trekked to Gangotri.

sibility that Nilkanth's pilgrimage to the source of Ganga, as a 12-year-old child yogi, could well be the first in the records of history.

The seven year sojourn of Nilkanth throughout India is full of unknown facts and revelations of the challenges he faced. When his other journeys will be presented

in future in context with the records of those who have endeavoured we hope to get further perspectives and insights into Nilkanth's divine personality!

APPENDIX-5

ARTICLES NEEDED BY PILGRIMS FOR KAILAS-MANSAROVAR PILGRIMAGE

HOW MANY OF THESE THINGS DID NILKANTH HAVE?

The pilgrimage to Kailas-Mansarovar, at 15,000 ft. above sea level, is one of the most challenging and difficult of all pilgrimages. Swami Pranavanandaji (1896), a sannyasi, completed 23 circumambulations of Mt. Kailas and 25 of Mansarovar. In his pilgrimage in 1936-37 he spent a whole year and in 1943-44 spent a full 16 months by the shores of Mansarovar. From his experiences he advises that anyone who has strong lungs, a sound heart and who is not suffering from high blood pressure can undertake the journey. Swami Pranavanandaji lists the articles needed for the Kailas-Mansarovar pilgrimage in his book, *Kailas-Mansarovar* (p.181-184). He says that 22 types of clothes and wear, over 24 different medicines and 40 miscellaneous articles are required.

Nilkanth Varni, on the other hand, travelled in the middle of winter, with the barest of means and all by himself. To get an idea of Nilkanth's austere pilgrimage, here is a list of what he had and the requirements listed by Swami Pranavanandaji.

Nilkanth's Possessions

Clothes: loincloth, waist-cloth, a filter cloth

Miscellaneous: a gourd *(kamandal)*, mala (rosary), Shaligram contained in a small cane case *(batvo)*, deer skin and staff.

Requirements for Pilgrims

Clothes

1. Two or three good woollen blankets. 2. Chutka (thick Tibetan blanket, to be hired or bought at Garbyang or at Taklakot). 3. Bedding according to one's own requirements. 4. One woollen shirt. 5. Two woollen pyjamas or trousers. 6. One woollen sweater. 7. Two pairs of woollen stockings. 8. One woollen muffler. 9. One pair of woollen gloves 10. One pair of pattis for legs. 11. One woollen balaclava cap (monkey-cap). 12. One woollen overcoat. 13. One light waterproof coat. 14. One waterproof covering for the hat when one is taking a hat. 15. Two or three pieces of oil-cloth or waterproof to cover the bedding and luggage. 16. Four Cotton shirts. 17. One pair of cotton pyjamas. 18. One pair of dhotis. 19. One pair of towels. 20. Three or four yards of spare cloth. 21. One pair of strong full-boots, preferably of canvas and one pair of ordinary shoes. 22. One umbrella.

Medicines

1. Chlorodyne, Camphorodyne or Bismuth – for diarrhoea. 2. Salphagannidine or Dover's powder – for dysentery. 3. For indigestion: Soda bicarb, Bhaskar-lavan. 4. Fruit salt – for indigestion and free motion. 5. Mepacrine or Palludrine tablets – for malaria. 6. For dressing wounds, cuts, boils, etc.: Sticking plaster, Potassium Permanganate, Tincture of Iodine, Acid Boric and Sulphanilamide powder, Absorbent

cotton. 7. Rolled bandages. 8. A.B.C. liniment – for pain in joints. 9. Cafiaspirin or Aspro – for headaches, slight indispositions, aching limbs, etc. 10. Influenza mixture. 11. Purgative pills. 12. Vaseline bottles – for applying to face, nose, and hands in cold places. 13. Amritdhara and Amrutanjan for all complaints. 14. For colds: Smelling salt, Vapex. 15. Ginger chips or some citrus articles – for billiousness. 16. J.J. Dechen's People's Medical Service Set. 17. D.D.T. Powder – for bugs, flies, lice, etc. 18. Carbolic acid or some other toothache cure. 19. Tooth-brush and tooth-powder. 20. Enema can or syringe. 21. Rubber catheter. 22. Hot water bag. 23. Clinical Thermometer. 24. Cibazal tablets – for pneumonia and bronchitis.

Miscellaneous Articles

1. Torch light with spare batteries. 2. Candles. 3. Hurricane lantern. 4. Kashmiri Kangri (an earthen pot for holding fire, encased in an indigenous willow-basket, generally carried under the long loose cloak, for keeping the body warm; can be secured from some Kashmiri friend). 5. Stove with accessories including methylated spirit. 6. Kerosene oil (to be taken from Almora). 7. Match boxes. 8. Portable cooking vessels, ladle, dishes, plates, tea-kettle, cups, spoons, tiffin carrier, etc. 9. Pressure, Ic-mic, Annapurna, or Rukmini Cooker (rice is not well cooked in ordinary vessels at altitudes above 10,000 ft.) 10. Thermos flask. 11. Two buckets or empty tins with handles – for fetching and heating water on the way. 12. One or two light package boxes for keeping vessels, kettle, cups, bottles, and such other breakables. 13. 1 Tin with lock – for keeping sweets and other eatables (often pilgrims complain against servants for pilfering eatables). 14. Two gunny bags – for putting the holdall and other boxes so as to be portable for carrying either by coolies or ponies. 15. Two kit-bags with locking arrangement. 16. Six small cloth bags for bringing Kailas-incense and

other articles on the return journey. 17. Two ropes, each 20 feet long. 18. Knife. 19. A pair of scissors. 20. Hand axe. 21. Two locks 22. Soaps for bathing and washing. 23. Stick with an iron point (to be bought at Haldwani or Almora). 24. A pair of green goggles to protect eyes from snow-glare and the effects of the severe cold winds. 25. Binoculars. 26. One good portable camera with sufficient number of roll films or film packs. 27. Kodak's magnesium ribbon holder, ordinary magnesium ribbon, or flash powder for taking photos in dark rooms, as at Khochar and for seeing clearly the caves, as at Dira-phuk, Zuthul-phuk, and other places. 28. Maximum and Minimum Thermometer. 29. Centigrade Thermometer for measuring temperatures of thermal springs. 30. One portable aneroid barometer. 31. Some toys, soaps, mirrors, cigarettes, and other petty presents to servants, horse-men, and to the monks of the monasteries. 32. Dried vegetables. 33. Spices, pickles, chutneys, tamarind, dried mango pieces, etc. 34. Dry fruits – grapes, kismis, dates, almonds, etc. 35. Tea, ovaltine, condensed milk, milk-powder, corn-flakes, the sweets of bal (made of evapourated milk with a little sugar) and chocolates of Almora, biscuits, lemon-drops, lozenges, sweetto, sugar-cubes, sugar-candy, etc. 36. Stationery, papers, pencils, pens, ink-bottles, postage-stamps, envelopes, cards, needles and thread, etc., a copy of the Bhagvad-Gita and copy of Bhajans. 37. Spring-balance which can weigh up to 100 lbs. – for weighing luggage at different stages. 38. Three or four empty hydrogen peroxide bottles or some other strong bottles with good corks for bringing the Holy waters of Kailas, Mansarovar, Gauri-kund, and Tirthapuri hot springs. 39. One pair of double-panniers (two thick bags tied together) for each person – for keeping eatables and other miscellaneous articles to be placed on the riding-pony. 40. Camphor, dhup, sopari, agarbatti, wicks soaked in ghee, vermilion, cardamom, and sundry articles which the pilgrim might choose to carry.

FOOTNOTES

1. *Kelinām samuhah kailam tena āsyate sthiyate iti Kailasah (Ās Upveshane)* । meaning, "Where Shiv (happiness) and Prakriti (nature and daughter of Himalaya) are always engrossed in a dance is Kailas."
2. Bhagvad Gita:10/23.
3. Sugriv says to all the monkeys, "After crossing the dangerous forest, you will be very happy to see the snow laden Kailas mountain."
   Tattu shrigramatikramya kāntāram romharshanam-kailsām pānduram prāpya hrashtā yuyam bhavushyath ।
   (Kishkindha Kand: 43-20).
   Further, in 43-21, Mansarovar is described in detail.
   Kailāsparvate Rām mansā nirmitam param ।
   Brahmanā narshārdul tenedam mānasam sarah ॥ (Bal Kand: 24-8).
4. Part 1, 60.
5. Hedin, Sven. *Trans-Himalaya, Discoveries and Adventures in Tibet,* Vol. 3. London: MacMillan and Co. Limited, 1913: 189.
6. Hedin, Sven. *Trans-Himalayas, Discoveries and Adventures in Tibet,* Vol. 2. p. 111.
7. Burrard, S.G. and Hayden, H.H. *A Sketch of the Geography and Geology of the Himalaya Mountains and Tibet,* Part-3. Delhi: Survey of India, 1934: 228.
8. Swami Pranavananda. *Kailas-Manasarovar,* 1st ed. Calcutta: S.P. League, Ltd., 1949: 7.
9. Atkinson, E.T. *Religion in the Himalayas.* 1974: 23.
10. Hedin, Sven. *Trans-Himalaya,* Vol. 3. p. 196.
11. He was a Kshatriya Rajput from Kanoj. He was an 'urdhvabahu' sadhu.
12. Duncan, Jonathan. *Asiatic Researches,* Vol. 5. Calcutta: Asiatic Society, 1808. Reprinted, New Delhi: Cosmo Publication, 1979: 37-52.
13. ibid, Vol. 5. p. 49.
14. Hedin, Sven. *Trans-Himalaya,* Vol. 3. p. 212-216.
15. Hedin, Sven. *Trans-Himalaya,* Vol. 3. p. 208.
16. Dave, Harshadray T. *Bhagwan Swaminarayan,* Vol. 5. Amdavad: Swaminarayan Aksharpith, 1987: 567.
17. Swami Shri Siddhanandmuni (also known as Swami Adharanandmuni). *Shri Haricharitramrut Sagar.* Varanasi: Swami Hariprakash, Pundit Shrinarmadeshwar Chaturvedi, 1972: 364.
18. Swami Pranavananda. *Kailas-Manasarovar,* 1st ed. Calcutta: S.P. League, Ltd., 1949: 111-145.
19. Swami Shri Siddhanandmuni (also known as Swami Adharanandmuni). *Shri Haricharitramrut Sagar.* Varanasi: Swami Hariprakash, Pundit Shrinarmadeshwar Chaturvedi, 1972: 366-377.
20. Kaur, Jagdish. Badrinath: A Study in Site Character, Pilgrims Patterns and Process of Modernisation. In *The Himalayan Heritage.* 1st ed. Delhi: Gian Publishing House, 1987: 224.
    Another story about Badrivan in the Purans says that Badrivan is in the Himalayan region, north of Badrinath on the banks of the River Sutlej. Today it is known as Thhulingmath. Many millennia ago

a tribe of brute people indulged in meat eating. So Narayan Rishi left that region and came to Mana Pass by the banks of river Alaknanda and settled down to perform austerities. Seeing her lord performing austerities in the open snowy terrain, Lakshmiji took the form of a Badri (berry) tree and spread her branches like a shelter above him. From thenceforth Narayan Rishi named his place as Badrikashram. Gradually the Badri trees flourished in the ashram.

In 1882, a British writer, Edwin T. Atkinson, notes in the *Himalayan Gazetteer* that formerly the place must have been full of berry (Badri) trees but now there weren't any.

Atkinson, Edwin T. *The Himalayan Gazetteer,* Vol. III Part-II. New Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 1973: 23.

21. Poddar, Hanumanprasad. *Tirthank.* Gorakhpur: Gita Press 1957: 60.
22. Swami Shri Siddhanandmuni (also known as Swami Adharanandmuni). *Shri Haricharitramrut Sagar.* Varanasi: Swami Hariprakash, Pundit Shrinarmadeshwar Chaturvedi, 1972: 2-18-18, p. 370.
23. The Satopanth and Kedar peaks were scaled from Gaumukh side and the shortcut to Badrinath via Arva valley and Ghastoli was also negotiated." Swami Pranavananda. *Kailas-Manasarovar.* p. 158.
24. Nilkanth Varni, on arriving in Loj, Gujarat, had narrated his travellings to Muktanand Swami. From his notes Swami Siddhanand (Adharanandmuni) wrote this scripture in Hindi verse.
25. Swami Shri Siddhanandmuni (also known as Swami Adharanandmuni). *Shri Haricharitramrut Sagar.* Varanasi: Swami Hariprakash, Pundit Shrinarmadeshwar Chaturvedi, 1972: 2-18-18, p. 370.
26. Bahadur, Rai Pati Ram. *Garhwal, Ancient and Modern.* Gurgaon: Vintage Books, 1992, p. 17.
27. Dave, Harshadray T. *Bhagwan Swaminarayan*, Vol. 4. Amdavad: Swaminarayan Aksharpith, 1987: 323.
28. A part of the nine khands of Bharatvarsh, *Bhagvadgomandal,* p. 6603.
29. Swami Shri Siddhanandmuni (also known as Swami Adharanandmuni). *Shri Haricharitramrut Sagar.* Varanasi: Swami Hariprakash, Pundit Shrinarmadeshwar Chaturvedi, 1972: 2-17-40, p. 369.
30. Dave, Harshadray T. *Bhagwan Swaminarayan*, Vol. 5. Amdavad: Swaminarayan Aksharpith, p. 567.
31. Swami Shri Siddhanandmuni (also known as Swami Adharanandmuni). *Shri Haricharitramrut Sagar.* Varanasi: Swami Hariprakash, Pundit Shrinarmadeshwar Chaturvedi, 1972: 2-19-15, p. 373.
32. Swami Pranavananda. *Kailas-Manasarovar.* p. 155-157.
33. "The Bhotiya village of Mana is the last human settlement of this region." Kaur, Jagdish. *The Himalayan Heritage.* p. 223.

    A British Officer, Captain Raper, had visited the village of Mana in 1802. At that time there were around 150 houses.
34. Fraser, James Baillie. *The Himala Mountains.* Delhi: Neeraj Publishing House, Reprint 1982: 284.
35. Bahadur, Rai Pati Ram. *Garhwal, Ancient and Modern.* Gurgaon: Vintage Books, p. 37.
36. Bahadur, Rai Pati Ram. *Garhwal, Ancient and Modern.* p. 37.
37. Bhuta, Maganlal J. *Uttarapath.* Mumbai: Parivrajak Prakashan, 1977: 217-8 (A translation of the Gujarati script).

38. Atkinson, E.T. *Himalayan Gazetteer.* Vol.3, Part 2, p. 583.
39. In 1929, Swami Prabodhanandji graduated in Philosophy from Siyalkot.
40. Swami Anand. *Baraf Raste Badarinath.* Amdavad: Balgovind Prakashak, 1970: 58, 64, 74-78 (All quotes are a translation of the Gujarati script).
41. Atkinson, E. T. *The Himalayan Gazeteer,* Vol. 3, Part 2. p. 582.
42. Swami Anand, *Baraf Raste Badarinath.* p. 59-64.
43. Swami Anand. *Baraf Raste Badarinath.* p. 59-64.
44. Swami Anand. *Baraf Raste Badarinath.* p. 66, 86.
45. Swami Pranavananda. *Kailas-Manasarovar.* p. 155-157.
46. "Thhuling Gompa, classically known as Thunding, is situated on the left bank of the river Sutlej at a distance of about a mile from the edge of water. This was founded in A.D. 1030 and is the most famous monastery in Western Tibet. Turks had pillaged this monastery on more than one occasion and set fire to it when, several hundreds of valuable Sanskrit and Tibetan manuscripts were reduced to ashes. The great Acharya Deepankara Shreejnana of Nalanda University fame came here in 1042 to preach Buddhism. He sojourned here for nine months and wrote many books including translations."
    - Swami Pranavananda. *Kailas-Manasarovar.* p. 156.
47. In the Van Parva of Mahabharat, Badarinath is shown to be near Kailas.
    Kailāsah parvatorājan shadyojansamuchhitah yatra devā samāyānti vishālā yatra Bhārat. (Mahabharat, Van Parva, 1-24, 139-11)
    Since a long time there has been a relation of give and take between the *pujari* of Badrinath mandir and the Lama priest of Thhuling Math.
    "...Before the Mana Pass is blocked up with snow, the abbot (of the Thhuling Math) sends every year some offerings to Badrinath temple and in return gets some *prasad* from the *pujari* or *Raval* of Badrinath..."
    Swami Pranavananda. *Kailas-Manasarovar.* p. 157.
    In this context see also footnote no. 20.
48. Hedin, Sven. *Trans-Himalaya,* Vol. 3. p. 216.
49. Bhuta, Maganlal J. *Uttarapath.* p. 219.
50. Vidyarthi, Ramsharan. *Kailas-path Par.* Delhi: Sharda Mandir Limited, 1902: 79.
51. Vidyarthi, Ramsharan. *Kailas-path Par.* p. 84.
52. Hedin, Sven. *Trans-Himalaya,* Vols. 1 & 2.
53. Swami Pranavananda. *Kailas-Manasarovar.* p. 155-157.
54. Swami Pranavananda. *Kailas-Manasarovar.* p. 157.
55. Atkinson, E. T. *Religion in the Himalays,* Vol. 3, Part 2. p. 377.
56. Bhuta, Maganlal J. *Uttarapath.* p. 221.
57. Vidyarthi, Ramsharan. *Kailas-path Par.* p.106-108.

58. Bhuta, Maganlal J. *Uttarapath.* 1977: 217-8.
59. Swami Pranavananda's scientific study and findings on Kailas and Manas were accepted by the Royal Geographical Society, London, and Survey of India Office which have incorporated them in their maps of 1941 and 1945. His research papers on Manasarovar were published in many scientific journals. *The Daily Telegraph* newspaper of London honoured him as 'the distinguished Indian Sanyasi – explorer and scientist'. The famous British author, Paul Brunton, has referred to him in his book, *A Hermit in the Himalayas.*
    Swami Pranavananda. *Kailas-Manasarovar,* 1st ed. Calcutta: S.P. League, Ltd., 1949: 237-239.
60. Swami Pranavananda. *Kailas-Manasarovar.* p. 27, 28.
61. Pranavananda. *Kailas-Manasarovar.* p. 28, 30.
62. Swami Pranavananda. *Kailas-Manasarovar.* p. 28.
63. Swami Pranavananda. *Kailas-Manasarovar.* p. 29.
64. Swami Pranavananda. *Kailas-Manasarovar.* p. 29.
65. Swami Pranavananda. *Kailas-Manasarovar.* p. 35.
66. Swami Pranavananda. *Kailas-Manasarovar.* p. 35.
67. Swami Shri Siddhanandmuni (also known as Swami Adharanandmuni). *Shri Haricharitramrut Sagar.* Varanasi: Swami Hariprakash, Pundit Shrinarmadeshwar Chaturvedi, 1972: 2-20-20.
68. Fraser, James Baillie. *The Himala Mountains.* Delhi: Neeraj Publishing House, 1982: 290.
69. *Asiatic Researches,* Vol. 5 [1808]. Reprinted, New Delhi: Cosmo Publications, p. 44.
70. Swami Shri Siddhanandmuni (also known as Swami Adharanandmuni). *Shri Haricharitramrut Sagar.* Varanasi: Swami Hariprakash, Pundit Shrinarmadeshwar Chaturvedi, 1972: 373.
71. Duncan, Jonathan. An Account of Two Fakeers, With their Portraits. *Asiatic Researches,* Vol. 5. Calcutta: Asiatic Society, 1808. Reprinted, New Delhi: Cosmo Publication, 1979: 45.
72. Cromie, William J. 'Meditation changes temperatures: mind controls body in extreme experiments'. *Harvard University Gazette,* 18 April 2002. Boston, USA.
73. ibid.
74. Vijay, Tarun. *Kailas-Manasarovar Yatra, Shakshat Shiv se Samvad,* 1st ed. Dehradun: Rutvik Publication, 1994: 64.
75. Vijay, Tarun. *Kailas-Manasarovar Yatra, Shakshat Shiv se Samvad,* p. 79.
76. Swami Adharanandmuni. *Shri Haricharitramrut Sagar*, 2-20-21.
77. Swami Pranavananda. *Kailas-Manasarovar.* p. 45.
78. Swami Shri Siddhanandmuni (also known as Swami Adharanandmuni). *Shri Haricharitramrut Sagar.* Varanasi: Swami Hariprakash, Pundit Shrinarmadeshwar Chaturvedi, 1972: 2-20-23-26.
79. Swami Shri Siddhanandmuni (also known as Swami Adharanandmuni). *Shri Haricharitramrut Sagar.* Varanasi: Swami Hariprakash, Pundit Shrinarmadeshwar Chaturvedi, 1972: 2-20-20, p. 122.
80. Swami Pranavananda. *Kailas-Manasarovar.* p. 23.
81. Swami Pranavananda. *Kailas-Manasarovar.* p. 32.

82. Swami Pranavananda. *Kailas-Manasarovar.* p. 35.
83. Swami Shri Siddhanandmuni (also known as Swami Adharanandmuni). *Shri Haricharitramrut Sagar.* Varanasi: Swami Hariprakash, Pundit Shrinarmadeshwar Chaturvedi, 1972: 2-20-20.
84. Vidyarthi, Ramsharan. *Kailas-path Par.* Delhi: Sharda Mandir Limited, 1902: 92-93.
85. Swami Shri Siddhanandmuni (also known as Swami Adharanandmuni). *Shri Haricharitramrut Sagar.* Varanasi: Swami Hariprakash, Pundit Shrinarmadeshwar Chaturvedi, 1972: 2-20-19 & 20.
86. Swami Pranavananda. *Kailas-Manasarovar.* p. 23-24.
87. Vijay, Tarun. *Kailas-Manasarovar Yatra, Shakshat Shiv se Samvad,* p. 81.
88. Swami Shri Siddhanandmuni (also known as Swami Adharanandmuni). *Shri Haricharitramrut Sagar.* Varanasi: Swami Hariprakash, Pundit Shrinarmadeshwar Chaturvedi, 1972: 2-20-19.
89. Vijay, Tarun. 1994: 31.
90. Duncan, Jonathan. An Account of Two Fakeers, With their Portraits. *Asiatic Researches.* Vol. 5, p. 45.
91. Swami Pranavananda. *Kailas-Manasarovar.* p. 44.
92. Swami Shri Siddhanandmuni (also known as Swami Adharanandmuni). *Shri Haricharitramrut Sagar.* Varanasi: Swami Hariprakash, Pundit Shrinarmadeshwar Chaturvedi, 1972: 2-20-18.
93. Swami Pranavananda. *Kailas-Manasarovar.* p. 44-45.
94. Hedin, Sven. *Trans-Himalaya*, Vol. 3. p. 197.
95. Hedin, Sven. *Trans-Himalaya*, Vol. 3. p. 205-206.
96. Vidyarthi, Ramsharan. *Kailas-path Par.* p. 97.
97. Vidyarthi, Ramsharan. *Kailas-path Par.* p. 106, 111.
98. Swami Shri Siddhanandmuni (also known as Swami Adharanandmuni). *Shri Haricharitramrut Sagar.* Varanasi: Swami Hariprakash, Pundit Shrinarmadeshwar Chaturvedi, 1972: 2-20-23.
99. Vijay, Tarun. *Kailas-Manasarovar Yatra, Shakshat Shiv se Samvad,* p. 44.
100. Sven. *Trans-Himalaya,* Vol.3. p. 213, 214.
101. Hedin, Sven. *Trans-Himalaya,* Vol. 3. p. 201.
102. Jonathan Duncan, Esq. An Account of Two Fakeers, With their Portraits, *Asiatic Researches,* Vol. 5. 1808: 44.
103. Hedin, Sven. *Trans-Himalaya,* Vol. 3. p. 214.
104. Swami Pranavananda. *Kailas-Manasarovar.* p. 16.
105. Swami Shri Siddhanandmuni (also known as Swami Adharanandmuni). *Shri Haricharitramrut Sagar.* Varanasi: Swami Hariprakash, Pundit Shrinarmadeshwar Chaturvedi, 1972: 378.
106. Poddar, Hanumanprasad. *Kalyan (Tirthank).* Gorakhpur: Gita Press, 1957: 53-60.
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GLOSSARY

adharma	unrighteousness
aghori	a mendicant who wanders about naked and eats meat
agni kund	fire pit
akshar mukta	a *jiva* that has attained ultimate liberation and resides forever in Akshardham with a divine body
annakut	offering of many food items before the *murti* of God.
arti	hindu ritual of waving lighted wicks before the *murti* of God as an act of worship.
asan	seat
asat	untruthful, perishable
ashtang-yoga	eight-fold yoga
atma	the pure soul
Avabhruth snan	ceremonial bath taken after the completion of a *yagna*
aval	type of herbal plant
bati	kind of baked wheat cake
batvo	kind of vessel (lotā)/container (batvo) of wicker work
baval	babul tree
bawa	a wayward ascetic
bhagvati diksha	initiation into the sadhu-fold, following which the renunciant dresses in saffron robes and observes strictly the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience
bhakta	devotee
bhang	a type of intoxicant

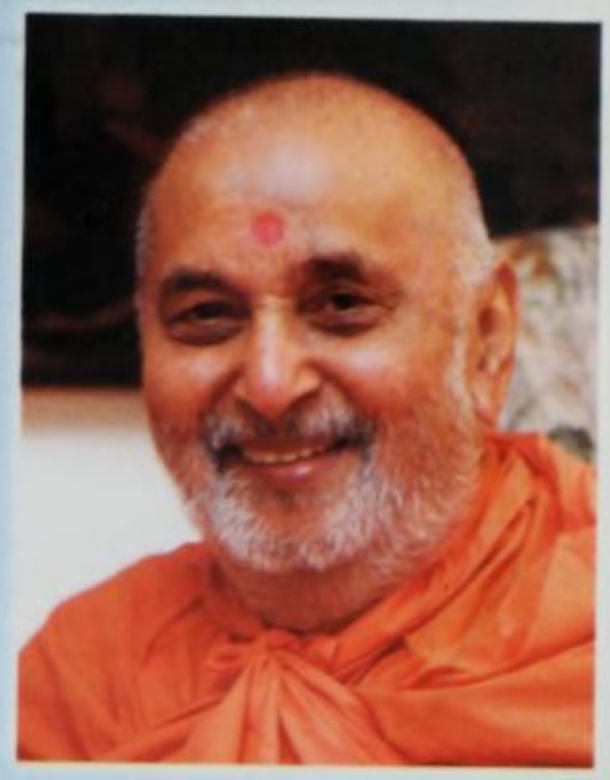
bhogi	one who enjoys sense pleasures
bilipatra	leaves of tree (*eagle marmaloss*) sacred to Shiv
brahmachari	celibate
brahmacharya	celibacy in body and mind
brahmand	universe
brahmarup	possessing qualities similar to Brahma
brahmi-sthiti	God-realisation
chandlo	auspicious vermillion mark applied on the forehead
chaturmas	four months of the monsoon season
chibhda	a kind of fruit similar to cucumber
chit	consciousness
chorashi	a kind of feast given to all the 84 types of Brahmin
dal	spicy soup of dissolved pulses
Darbar	a person of Kshatriya caste
darbar	court of residence belonging to a king or feudal ruler, traditionally with a central courtyard surrounded by rooms with verandas
darbha	a kind of grass used in ceremonies
deva	deity
dham	abode
dhup	frankincense
diksha	initiation
dudhpaua	parched rice with milk
ekadashi	a holy day of the lunar-based Hindu calendar which comes twice a month, first on the 11th day of the bright half of the month and then again on the 11th day of the dark half of the same month. On *ekadashi* people spend more time in devotion and perform austerity such as fasting or eating only certain types of food, such as fruit. Grains are prohibited
ekantik bhakta	God-realised devotee
ekantik bhav	one possessing an elevated spiritual state wherein one offers bhakti to God along with dharma, *gnan* and *vairagya,* i.e., all four of the attributes of Ekantik Dharma
ekantik dharma	collective term for the four endeavours of dharma (religious disciplines and duties, i.e., niyams), *gnan* (spiritual knowledge), *vairagya* (an aversion for worldly pleasures), and bhakti (devotion) coupled with the knowledge of

	God's greatness – the cultivating of which will lead one to become an *ekantik bhakta* who transcends God's *maya* and attains His abode. Also called Bhagvat dharma
gandharvas	class of celestial deities whose occupation is music and singing; musicians of heaven
ganthiya	fried, savoury snack food
gnan	spiritual knowledge
gopi	women of the cowherd class who were devotees of Shri Krishna
guna	innate nature
gutko	small book with very little length and breadth
hindola	a swing
ishwar	second of the five eternal entities. Infinite in number. Similar to *jiva* with respect to being bound by *maya*
janoi	a sacred thread
jiva	individual, embodied soul still bound by *maya* and consequently undergoing the cycles of birth and death. One of the five eternal entities
jivatma	see *jiva*
jogi	one who practices yoga
kalash	a small water-pot made of copper
kamandal	earthen or wooden water-pot of an ascetic
kanthi	double-threaded necklace, usually made of tulsi beads, received by *satsangis* upon initiation into the Satsang Fellowship, and worn as a sign of their affiliation to God. Derived from the noun *kantha* meaning neck
kaupin	loin-cloth
kavad	wooden stick balanced across the shoulder with two receptables hanging from it to contain things
khichdi	spiced boiled rice and lentil grain
kirtan	devotional song
kopin	loin-cloth
kos	leather-bag for drawing water from well
kumkum	vermillion powder
kund	tank with steps leading to the water usually square in shape. Pit used for *yagna*
lila	the actions of God and the God-realised Sadhu which are believed to be

	divine
Makarsankranti	a festival to mark the transition of the Sun from Sagittarius to Capricorn
mala	rosary
mandap	pandal
manjira	small cymbal
maya	one of the five eternal realities; ignorance, darkness, material universe
mayik	pertaining to *maya*, opposite of divine
mridang	kind of percussion instrument
mukta	liberated soul
murti	sacred idol of God or a deity that is revered and worshipped
muth-dal	kind of pulse
nirakar	formless
nirgun	not mayik, divine
nirvikalp	without alternatives or doubts. Adjective describing faith or state of being in which one sees only God – but no doubts or distinctions remain whatsoever, i.e. a state of perfect realisation
padmasan	one of the eighty-four *asans* of yoga
pagh	headgear
paghdi	turban
panchvishay	the five sense objects of enjoyment for the five senses
paramhansa	A male sadhu of the highest order, characterised by his ability to discriminate between *sat* and *asat* – just as swans were traditionally considered to be able to distinguish between milk mixed with water.
pitambar	yellow silk dhoti
pranam	obeisance offered with folded hands
prasad	sanctified food, blessed and consecrated by having been offered to God
puri	small, flat and round fried pieces of wheat dough. Usually eaten with curried vegetables
rag	tune
rajas	one of the three *gunas;* attribute/state of: activity, restlessness, anger, violence, desire to satisfy the senses and extravagance
rajogun	quality of passion
ras	circular dance accompanied by singing
ras-rotli	mango juice and chapatti

rath	chariot
rayan	type of tree
rotla	a basic unleavened bread-like staple food of many parts of Gujarat, made generally of millet flour that is kneaded and patted into a flat, circular shape before being cooked on an earthen or metal hot plate
rudrakshmala	a rosary made from the seed of the plant *eleocarpus lanceolaties*
sagun	not divine
sakar	having form
sakshi	the soul (as seer), witness
sat	truth; imperishable
sathvo	flour of parched barley, wheat, etc.
satsang	the practice of spiritually associating with the Satpurush, fellow *satsangis,* one's own *atma* and the sacred shastras of the Satsang fellowship
satsangi	a member of the Satsang fellowship. One who practices *satsang*
sattvagun	quality of goodness
shakti	strength
shehnai	kind of wind instrument like a clarion
shikharbaddh	mandir which has shikhars or pinnacles in which five *artis* are performed daily and daily worship of deities is performed only by sadhus
shiro	a sweet delicacy, usually of wheat flour, ghee, sugar and condiments
shishya	disciple
sloka	stanza
shraddh	ceremony performed for the propitiation, satisfaction or salvation of the ancestors, mainly by offering rice balls and water
stotra	hymn of praise
sud	bright half of lunar month
sukhadi	a sweet delicacy of wheat flour, ghee and gur
surwal	trouser, pyjamas
sushumna	the middle of the three main arteries mentioned in Hath Yoga
tamas	one of the three *gunas,* attribute/state of: inactivity, lethargy, darkness and ignorance
tamogun	quality of darkness, ignorance
tantric	one who performs magical formularies for the worship of deities or the attainment of superhuman powers

tilak	'U' shaped mark made with sandalwood paste on one's forehead
tripundra	mark on forehead consisting of three lines made with ashes of cow-dung
trishul	trident
tyagi	an ascetic, a sadhu
upasana	to offer worship to God by believing Him to be the Cause of all incarnations, eternally with divine form, the all-doer and manifest
urdhvapundra tilak	upright *tilak*
urdhvarekha	line rising to the toe
vad	dark half of lunar month
vairagya	detachment. An aversion or strong, persistent dislike, generally for the world and its *mayik* pleasures, i.e., the *panchvishays*. Characterised by remaining detached from the body and the *brahmand,* or from all things that are the products of Prakruti. One of the four attributes of Ekantik Dharma
yagna	sacrificial worship. Ceremonial ritual performed as a form of worship to seek the good favour and receive the blessings of the deities
yagna kund	sacrificial pit
yagnopavit	sacred thread
yati	person with great self-control
yug	any one of the four ages according to the Puranas



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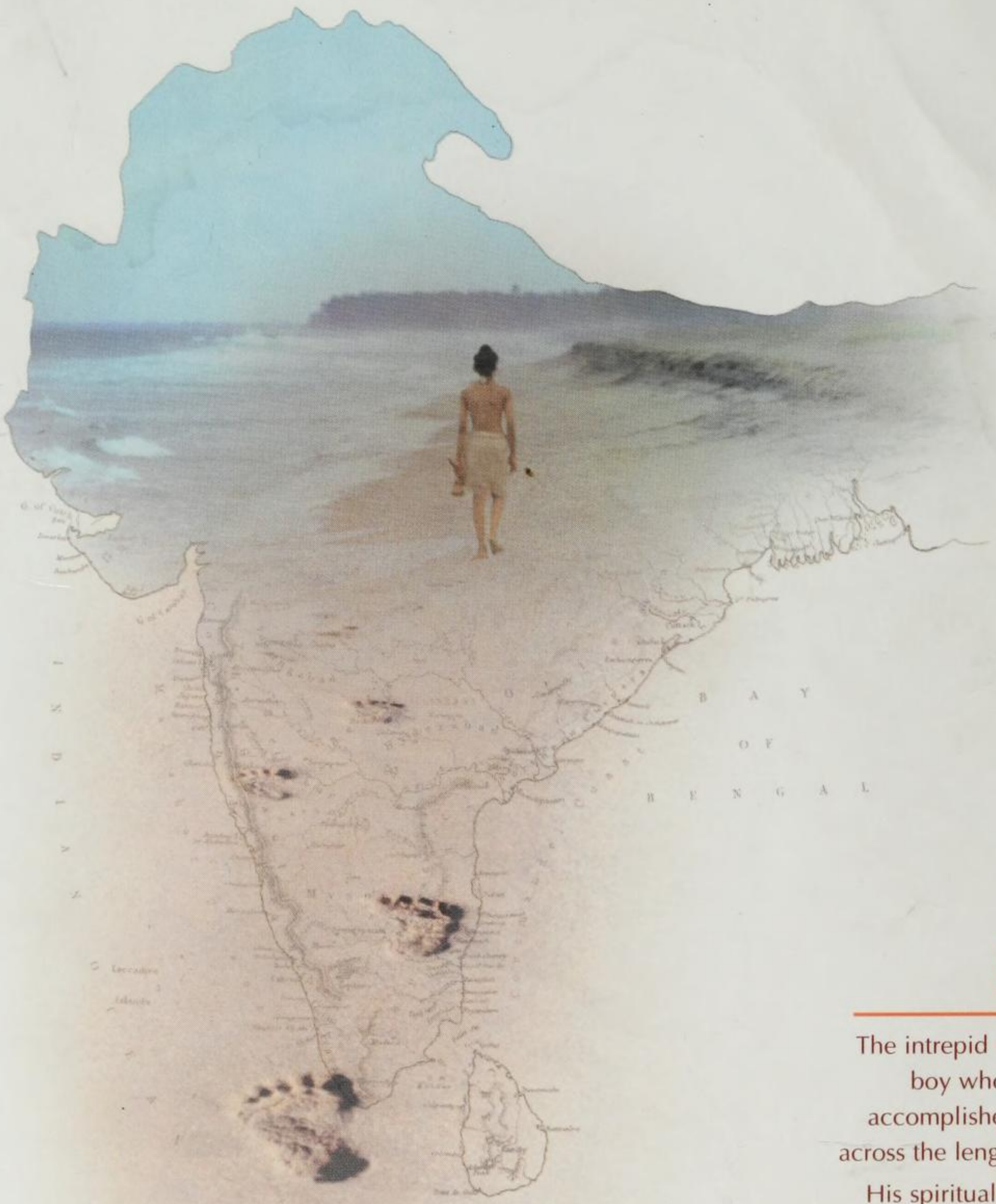

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